

## To Be Found

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by [Tolpen](#)

### Summary

Four years after the Vestige has defeated Molag Bal and two years after the whole dragon fiasco in Elsweyr, Lyris Titanborn is peacefully retired at Riften. That is until she finds Abnur Tharn in a burned crater in the middle of the woods. Although he hasn't left the best impression the last time she's seen him, which was in Coldharbour, she goes out of her way to see him alive and healthy again.

Admittedly, it is a decision that in the long term is going to save whole Tamriel (again), but everyone involved is not entirely sure it was worth the trouble. By the time the Daedras appear, nobody is even sure it is going to be *enough*.

### Notes

Changelog:

20th DEC 2019 - Spellcheck and minor wording adjustments done to chapters 1 - 9.

15th JAN 2020 - Jean Elliott has been so kind and did a proof-read of the first 11 chapters.

The edits have been uploaded now. I also did the plot math and figured out the final number of chapters.

16th JAN 2020 - Jean Elliot finished editing chapters 12 - 15 and was repaid with 11 drawings of very chunky raccoons (and one panda).

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Unquiet Peace

## Chapter Summary

Lyris finds something. Or rather... someone.

As strange as it was, Lyris finds an odd sort of peace here. It is not her old home – she doubts she could ever return there – but her cabin near Riften is a new home. At first it was a house, but she made it a home. It was a hard work to get there, and she is rightfully proud of it all.

She tried it as a farmhand at Frostmoon's first, but that went poorly. Well, her first try actually was joining the militia. That's when she found out she has a problem mindlessly obeying the command of authorities if she knows better than them and they aren't capable or even willing to listen to her.

So, not a soldier, not a farmer, so what is left you can do in Skyrim when you are a half-giant girl? Her voice is not good enough to be a skald. After everything she's been through in Coldharbour, adventuring is not something she would be able to pick up with a serious face.

And thus she is a hunter. She supplies Riften with game and furs, trades them to make the end's meet. She is good at it. It is not exactly fulfilling, but in a way it is peaceful. An odd sort of peace, as she's said. The sort of peace Cyrodiil knows now – the Empire itself might not be in war, but yet... Yet...

She knows, and it's not even a knowledge anywhere deep down, that she'd jump after something thrilling if there was something. And by her standards a company of frost trolls does not count as thrilling. As she explained over at Frostmoon's when she rolled out the basket full of troll heads, it was merely bothersome.

That's why her eyes widen now, and her heart jumps up and she can hear it beating in her ears. Before her very eyes the Sun's Dawn snow is thawing. A wave of heat rolls over her, as if a salamander breathed in her face, and before she knows it, she is ankle-deep in quickly melting snow

When she turns around, she sees the wave of thawing has stopped several meters behind her backs. She's never been much of an educated girl, but a lifetime of experience and observation added up to her intellect of survival, and this is what their combined efforts came up with: The edge of the melted area was slightly curved, which meant that whatever prompted this sudden wave of heat had a centre and that centre was pretty far away. By the guess of it, a mile and half. If Lyris had known more about mathematics, her guess could be more accurate. But as it was, she's never cared not for the exact numbers.

Out loud, however, she only slightly smiles and says: "Well, surely this is something." She shifts her grip on her axe and ventures forward to meet whatever it is further.

As she progresses, the earth has been melted as well, turning it into a mud as the melted snow – now water – sinks into it. After she crosses the clearing, there is steam rising from the ground and the grass is showing. Later the grass is dried, then scorched and the earth cracked. The trees around her bear sign of fire marking them from the direction into which Lyris is heading.

She believes she has reached the epicentre, although you could aim an arrow at her forehead and she wouldn't be able to tell you what *epicentre* means, when she begins to wade in hot ashes. When she notices the figure laying on the ground, she even grins widely.

Her cheerful enthusiasm drops when she gets close enough to recognize the features. A small man of a thin frame and little height. All the way from the left side of his half-melted breastplate to the hip below is stuck mushy cinder-and-blood mush, considered the giant claw-mark going through the plate, the blood is the man's own. He does not appear to be anywhere near his senses or even a waking state.

Lyris curses under her breath as she check the wound – at least two ribs broken. The fracture does not concern her that much on its own, she's seen people to walk off far worse. But the fact that she's found Abnur Tharn like this in this place? Well, that is certainly worrying.

But worries can wait for later. Right now she is too busy carrying Tharn back to her home without causing him any further damage as fractured ribs love to puncture lungs when not handled properly. In the end she takes off her cloak, wraps the man in it like a pig in blanket, and literally carries him six miles home.

A known fact: Doing anything for any Tharn is an ungrateful work. Lyris has learned the hard way. But usually it is in some manner gratifying. For example you usually get to hack a lot of Daedras into pieces. You don't get a word of thanks, but at least you see results.

The first three days, however, Lyris doesn't get even that. Abnur Tharn remains stubbornly unconscious. Lyris has called in for a healer from Riften who owed her a couple of favours and also some money to check up on him. Ulfey, as the healer has been named by his parents, mended the broken ribs together and tended to the previously unnoticed countless bruises, burns, and scratches.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd think,” Ulfey tries to lighten up the mood as he applies the thistle healing salve for the umpteenth time, “that a dragon tried to have him for breakfast with eggs.”

“But you do know better,” Lyris reminds him.

“Er, yes. Uh.” He staggers. “Look, Lyris, I'm almost deeming his situation fine and stable and all. This Imperial friend of yours, about whom you still haven't told me a thing might I add, seems to be as healthy as a toasted grandpa who fights bears as a hobby can be, except...”

Lyris patiently waits, but Ulfey doesn't seem to be getting to the point. She finally snaps: “Except what?”

“The fever worries me.” He takes a deep breath and puts on his professional face. He isn't just a local herbalist and healer, he has actually gone south for a couple of years, went to a medical school somewhere in Cyrodiil, before they kicked him out for his tendency to bring mead even to exams. When Ulfey puts on a professional face, it means that the common Nord sense (and the basic three of “mead, thick soup, and sauna” which cures everything) has come to its wits ends.

“Usually fever is accompanied by sweating, because while the body is heating up to kill whatever it is fighting with, it is trying to cool itself down as well. He's as dry as a tavern on Mondas morning, even though you could bake potatoes on him. I've given him some antipyretics—

“Anti-what?” Lyris interrupts. Damn those educated know-it-alls and their tendency to use long

fancy words. If Ulfey was a mage, he'd be even worse with that.

“Antipyretical means that the substance reduces fever. Supposedly, anyway,” he shoots Tharn an ugly glare. “I’ve tried mudcrab paste, columbine tea, and cornflower tea as well, but with no results. Even the thistle-frost miriam ointment, which doesn’t actually reduce fever, only drains the warmth, has done nothing, and that’s the ointment which gives you an ugly frostbite if you don’t handle it in gloves. It’s been the only thing that has managed to calm down all those burns he has, somewhat. They might not be big, but they certainly are many and certainly persistent in staying.”

“Give me the bad news then, doctor. What’s he down with?”

“I am still most keen on the dragon theory. That, or he swallowed a fire atronach without burning his teeth and tongue out.”

They both look at the man in question. Ulfey exhales out an unadmitted defeat and says: “Look, I’ll leave the thistle salve and miriam ointment with you, apply them in the morning and in the evening. Thistle for the bruises, miriam for the burns; don’t touch that one with bare skin. Change his bandages at least every other day. I’ll raid my brother’s drawers, I’m sure there are some tunics he’s outgrown, so you don’t have to have this guy laying in here in that scorched tatters.”

“That’d be nice of you, Ulfey. Thank you,” Lyris nods.

The healer is headed towards the door when he turns around and pushes his luck: “Tell me, who that is, even?”

Lyris looks at him, at Abnur Tharn. She speaks before she thinks: “I found him in the middle of the forest. I have no idea what to think of it, but by the looks of it, he’s a mage, isn’t he? It doesn’t hurt when a mage owes you one.” She is very proud of herself that she came up with that on her own and didn’t even lie at that.

# The Waking Days

## Chapter Summary

Abnur Tharn wakes up. Everyone disliked that.

Ulfey comes with the promised clothes at the end of the week. They are still too big but nothing a pair of scissors, or in Lyris's case a very sharp knife, and a night with thread and needles couldn't fix. When the healer checks up on his most unusual patient, with a great deal of relief he notes that the strange fever has faded away. Lyris doesn't tell him that for the first four days she's been using Abnur to boil water before he finally cooled down enough.

Tharn wakes up the day after that. It has gone like this:

Lyris is minding her own business, carving a hare for dinner, when all of sudden somebody behind her yelps. She turns around, knife still in hand, and sees Tharn on her bed as he is trying to rise to his feet. He hits his head on the wall, though, and falls back. Only then he seems to notice his surroundings for the first time. The look on his face is priceless and Lyris wants it framed to have something to laugh at.

She puts the knife down and wipes her hands in her trousers. "You're up," she states the obvious as she walks over to check whether or not his rushed actions haven't opened up any of his injuries.

Tharn frowns. He takes a very shaky breath and then very slowly he speaks, focusing on every syllable the way he does when he is very drunk: "My apologies, Titanborn, but whatever you've just said, I did not hear it."

"What, have you gone deaf?" Lyris pulls up a stool and sits down. When she hunches over, the two of them can see eye to eye. Although, that is now where Tharn is looking, his eyes seem to be fixed on her lips.

"It would appear so," he says. "I do hope it is only temporal condition. However, I am somewhat capable of reading lips, so as long as you speak clearly and somewhere I can see your face, I should not have much trouble understanding you."

Lyris frowns. Well, damn. "As long as it means you won't be your usual blabbering self. Now. You are at my place, the nearest civilization is RIFTEN. You have two broken ribs, torn hip, some ugly bruises and burns, and you've just shaken off a weird fever. I have no idea what you've been up to and I couldn't care less," she continues even though she could care far, far more less, "but you are in no condition to keep doing it, so you are staying here until your bones get it back together."

Tharn seems to digest it at a slower pace than is his usual, but he finally nods.

She huffs. That man could be at least grateful, or say something about how he isn't grateful at all. But no, she has to do all the work by herself around here. "I'm making something to eat. Do gain strength so that I don't have to feed you again." After that Lyris stands up, kicks the stool back under the table, and returns to her cooking.

It is only when she begins dealing with the carrot for the stew when she hears Tharn saying, albeit very quietly as it is: “Thank you.” It nearly has her cut off the last few digits of her fingers.

Days follow. That's nothing unusual, it's their job and they are paid for that. Or at least Lyris assumes they are paid, otherwise she doesn't understand why would they bother. Tharn is uncharacteristically quiet, but that is – or at least so Lyris assumes – because she is his only company and they both know who's going to end up with a broken nose if he lets his filthy mouth too loose. Besides that, while his hearing is slowly returning, he still doesn't hear much and any talking takes him a great focus.

Lyris finds herself idly wondering what has Tharn been doing. The last time she's seen him was four years ago, right before they helped the Vestige to revert the Soulburst. She doesn't like to think about that at all, though, because it makes her head hurt awfully. It is better to think of it that she moved from the Harbourage to the Rift, no weird transition period of apocalyptic wasteland of Oblivion in the in-between.

All that said, she doesn't ask. And in turn, Tharn doesn't answer the unasked and doesn't question on his own. He's made a point of being useful, however. The other day when Lyris was preparing the flank for roasting she turned around and found Tharn sitting by her side, all focused on peeling potatoes.

Ulfey has dropped by two more times since his last visit. He'd have more luck coaxing water from stone than any sort of information from Tharn, though. As they weren't introduced, the healer kept referring to him as the most peculiar patient, but deemed him in no need of further care of a healer by the end of his second visit. It might have been related to the fact that by that point Tharn's hearing, and thus also his eloquence, had completely returned, and Ulfey detests being bested in the usage of long fancy words.

“Thanks for that,” Lyris notes as the door close shut behind the healer, “I think he's got a thing for me.”

“Always glad to save you from terrible decisions. He might be a good healer, but besides that your self-respect would have to go hang itself off a pine if you were to have anything with him.”

Lyris pouts: “Well, I was just to mention that if he was to swoon around me any longer, I'd throw him out through the window. But right now I have every intention to call him back here, just to spite you.”

“That's animal cruelty.”

“To you or to him?”

“That,” Tharn rubs his chin, “I am still deciding.”

“Well, he still said that I ought to keep my eyes on you. Magically mended ribs still like to crack and snap.” She gleefully watches as Tharn's smirk fades.

“I hope you don't plan to bury me in this casket of a house forever, Titanborn. One more week and I'll be begging you to throw me out.”

“That's an interesting idea. Surely I'd love to see you beg.” She turns back to the basket of wood by the hearth and adds some to the fire. “Although, it's winter and we are in Skyrim. You might not want to go outside. You haven't got the proper attire.”

In spite of that, the next day as soon as the sun rises above the horizon, which to be fair was at half past ten, Abnur Tharn digs up the remains of his red cloak and, wraps himself in it to the best of his possibilities, and ventures out with the words that he'll be back to lunch at the latest. Lyris gives him a head start of the time equivalent of brewing and drinking some tea, and then she goes after him. By now she is a skilled hunter and in theory should have no difficulties in tracking down one old and not fully recovered battlemage.

So much for the theory. As it turns out, there are no footprints left and it takes Lyris a couple of minutes of thinking and listening to figure out that Abnur has just gone around the house. She locates him by grunting.

He is there, forehead rested on one of the wooden fence. He is huddled in his cloak and is visibly shaking. From exhaustion, not from cold.

“Tharn, you have five words to explain what the hell you're doing.” She crosses her arms and frowns at him.

He looks up at her, deep in thoughts. Then he discards whatever idea he's had and just waves his hand vaguely to the left to the pile of chopped wood. It has admirably grown since yesterday evening.

“Chopping wood?” Lyris is alarmed. “In your condition? What, you want your bones to crack again? Not to mention that the last time I've seen you handling an axe you've nearly decapitated yourself.”

Instead of answering, Tharn just folds hands behind his back, frowns for a couple of seconds, and then another of the logs at the back snaps in ten different places and falls apart. The Imperial turns around and critically eyes the work. “There have been times, not even so long ago,” he comments sourly and slightly out of breath, “when I wouldn't find this work anywhere near toiling, and even considered it a lazy past time. Anyway, Titanborn, your concern for my rib cage is unnecessary, as you see. The greatest danger to me right now is an aneurysm if I overdo it.”

“Overjoyed to be able to use magic, eh? When am I supposed to expect my cabin to burn to the ground?”

Tharn lowers his eyes to the wooden fence on which he's been leaning. Lyris follows to see that the spots under and around his elbows have turned into charcoal.

“Let's just say that I am not keen on using any fire related magic in the foreseeable future.”

“And just when I was about to ask you whether you are cold out here.”

“Titanborn, I am four times your elder. It serves neither of us for you to be a mother hen.”

Lyris rolls eyes. “Once you stop acting like such a child I might even consider it.”

There is a long pause before there is finally an answer to that: “You've gotten far better at this banter since the last time we have spent with each other. Whoever is that bastard you've learned from, they've done well.”

She doesn't answer anything to that. Firstly, she doesn't want to spoil her victory by anything stupid, and secondly, Tharn would be insufferable for days if she admitted him any credit in this regard. Instead she says they should better head inside because it's damnably cold.





## Interlude: A Few Thoughts on Coexistence (by A. Tharn)

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter no stuff happens, except the fact that we've got Tharn's POV on, well, everything. We aren't sticking to that POV, though.

There is a lot of unasked questions between the two of them. You don't get to be active on the Imperial political scene for over a century without being able to fill in the void left by words unspoken, because as Abnur's late grandmother would tell you – given that you'd get her drunk enough to share any wisdom with you, although that was not that hard – the greatest piece of information is the one people don't tell you.

Some of Titanborn's questions which she hasn't asked yet: Where have you been? What happened to the Amulet of the Kings? You dare to show up your face here in my life after everything you've done? What is that with the ongoing fire disaster theme here? Would you shut up for five minutes? And let's not forget: Tharn, what the hell?

The only question Abnur can think of: How have you been? And as the days go, one a bit more bothering: Why are you doing this, Titanborn?

He's never been the one to feel fitting into any company, one to feel wanted anywhere. In the private of his mind – so private that even he doesn't visit it much often and if he does, it is one of those late-night to too-early-morning insomniac visit when every other corner of his mind has been raided and scrubbed clean and there is nothing left to do – he admits that his prickly demeanour is a way of dealing with this social solitude. This way it is a conscious choice he is making every day of his life instead of it being a circumstance he's found himself in and does not know how to change. In another words, it is one of the countless cheese-chants preventing absolute insanity.

Definitely Titanborn is not overjoyed from his company. Or delighted in the slightest whatsoever. And yet... Yet she dragged him into her home from the middle of the woods where he had landed two weeks ago. She called a healer to see to his wounds. She tended to his broken ribs and torn hip with the same grim determination she cut onions for the stew. The day she threw an additional blanket at him as a blizzard was sweeping through the Rift – that was yesterday – Abnur concluded he'll never understand the inner machination of thoughts of that woman.

His strategy of dealing with Titanborn has always been to make himself indispensable, because the Nord, despite everything suggesting the on contrary, could listen to a reason and would not kill him in a fit of rage if whatever it was they were doing could not be done without him. Of course here and now when all that Lyris does is cooks and hunts, this strategy is not applicable. So at leasts he tries to be useful and not such a pain in the ass, as to improve his chance of survival. In theory he should be able to stop enraged half-giantess attempting to decapitate him with a battle axe. But whenever he delves into that mental scenario any deeper than this, he cannot imagine himself raising any spell against Titanborn, not even as much as to conjure up a teeny weeny bolt of lightning.

It can be peaceful, in an odd sort of way. He grows more and more restless with each day passing as his health returns. Titanborn might have comments on his limp, but no longer he has to stop every few steps out of pain and sheer exhaustion. Besides, he's left unfinished business behind in

Pellitine. He still needs to figure out how to explain that to Titanborn and make his excuses to leave without her knocking his teeth out.

Of course, he could run away. Again.

That is another thing: His magic is returning. A bit different, but he believes he knows the reason of that. He could easily teleport out of here now without any consequences. Well, immediate consequences. Titanborn would be never able to forgive him and the Divines are his witnesses that she is an useful woman and a dangerous opponent.

The best option he has is to wait. Sooner or later a chance for an opening move has to appear. At the very latest it will be when he will have healed enough for Lyris to throw him out on his ear. But probably it will be sooner.

## Three Opening Moves

### Chapter Summary

A Hunter-Warrior, a Healer, and a Battlemage get to play their opening move, in this order. Not everyone plays them well.  
Today's weather: Bloody Skyrim Winter.

“Don't do anything stupid. I'll be back, and I will eat your liver if you try to set my house on fire.” Lyris has just successfully stuffed her braid under the furry cap, and is now pulling mittens over her hands. With Tharn's progressing recovery she feels confident enough to leave him home alone for a few hours to go for a short hunt. Riften isn't going to starve without her supplying, but her own rations have been thinning lately.

Tharn looks up at her with a mischievous grin. “Tempting. On my liver you are most likely to chip a tooth or two.”

She turns to him sharply: “And if I come home to find my stash of mead missing, I'm throwing you out as wolf-food.”

“I am not that desperate a man, Titanborn,” the man stands up from the bed and limps to the table. He might have healed well, but until the hip recovers fully, he'll be limping. It might take some time, Lyris admits to herself, after all he is not exactly the youngest. On the other hand, she's never heard him to complain about it, so it can't hurt much.

“Sure you aren't. Not after you've helped me to get rid of that bottle yesterday.” She is going to out-drink him one day. But it is not going to be on an empty stomach.

“Yes. All things considered, Titanborn, don't you actually live alone?” When Lyris only tilts her head and furrows her brow, indicating she does not catch up how it is related to the mead, Tharn continues: “If you have a pantry full of mead and nobody to drink it with, you might have a problem with alcohol.”

“You have a problem with alcohol,” is the only reply Lyris is capable of. She marches outside and slams the door behind herself before the bloody Imperial smartass comes up with some biting comment.

So what that she likes to drink? She is a Nord, Daedra-damned bollocks! She was basically born with mead in her veins! Mead didn't always have to be a celebration, it could be a warming embrace in the times of solitude. A way to forget all the ugly things for a while. To lose the focus when the focus was bad. And Divines know that Lyris has a lot of bad focuses. That's what mead's for, to make life a bit sweeter and better. She is not having a problem. She'd have a problem if she was drinking herself under the table daily without a reason. Or if she drank until she couldn't keep a hold of her weapon. A few cups a day is nothing near a problem.

Who is Tharn to police her around her life? Like he's the one to speak. She's found him in the middle of nowhere woods in a burned out crater with him having no idea how he came to be there in the first place. He was positively toasted when she's brought him home, shredded to pieces. And *she* is the one with a problem?

The boiling anger can't be soothed even by the cold blowing wind. Today it isn't snowing, which is just as well, because most of the places have already been snowed in. Her place, the Titan's Hearth as people nicknamed basically within the first three days after she had settled down here, is fairly close to RIFTEN which is a good luck – the Mages Guild thawed the way from RIFTEN to NIMHALTEN, which meant that neither Lyris nor Frostmoon are completely cut off from civilization, but that's pretty much all that's been cleared. Besides somebody should explain to the clever Mages that if they melt snow to water in winter, the water will freeze. Good news for all the people who fancy skating, though.

Lost in angry thoughts, she snaps at the growling sabercat which has appeared out of nowhere: “And what's *your* excuse?”

The creature's excuse was most likely hunger, to which Lyris argument against is her axe. Needless to say that she is proven right in this exchange of opinions, the proof of that being the trail of blood freezing on the broken snow as Lyris drags the dead feline home.

Sabercat is not the tastiest, but it makes a good stew and the fur sells well. Especially the winter fur. It's fluffier, and thus both warmer and prettier. It's actually pretty enough for Lyris to consider just keeping it.

A little slaughter has made her feel much better, and the ache in muscles as she strains them in dragging the dead beast is comfortingly grounding her in the present. An odd sort of peace, but a peace nevertheless. When she can see her cabin, she no longer feels like burning it to the ground with everything and *everyone* inside.

She doesn't even give Ulfey her infamous murderous glare when she notices him approaching. Ulfey is not new to ice-skating, but he has the grace of a frog on hot sand. Although, Lyris is not quite sure whether or not his obvious inability to stop in place is just a bad excuse to touch her breasts. She wouldn't put it past him, but then between his hands and her skin are several layers of wool, fur, and leather, so it can't be that much enjoyable experience for him.

“Oi, Lyris, watch out where you are going.” It can't be said about Ulfey that he hasn't got some balls. He had stood up against a wild swine with piglets armed only with a fork, not even a half-giantess is going to intimidate him. Especially not if he's been trying to court her for two years before he finally gotten the hint that she isn't just playing hard to get. Now he is trying his act on Lyris.

She shoves him away. It has to be admired he doesn't lose his balance, despite flailing arms around wildly enough to remind of a windmill. “What you want, Ulfey? No one's sick in here.”

“Oh, yeah. Here.” He rummages about his pockets while mumbling: “I hope I haven't lost it along the way, that'd be awkward. No, still got it.” The healer hands Lyris a bit crumbled envelope with a grease stain over the golden wax seal. The paper has a sugary smell to it. “They gave it to me at Mages' when I was dropping off some bear lard with herbal tea for them.” Ulfey's holy trinity of healing has bear lard instead of broth. Could be worse, the barber-surgeon in Lyris's old platoon substituted the broth with fish oil, and Lyris would trade sleeping in barracks with soldiers covered in bear lard over barracks full of soldiers covered in fish oil any day, thank you very much.

“So they've eaten the messenger that they entrusted the letter to you?” She turns the letter over. The back side of the envelope bears her name in very richly brown ink, but she does not recognize the handwriting.

“Well,” Ulfey scratches the back of his parka, “not exactly. It came in through a teleport, which is how they send letters to each other in the guild. And I just happened to come in as Ullima – that's

that Dunmer alchemist I've told you about when I was picking up the mistletoe with the first snow, I'm not sure if you remember – asked, and here I quote: *'Who in Oblivion is Lyris known as Titanborn?'* End quote. So I told her that I know you and can deliver it for you.”

“Interesting.” Lyris notices she has dirtied the envelope with the sabercat's blood. “And have you told her that I've literally been to Oblivion?”

“You've been to Oblivion?” Ulfey puffs out air, leaving him with a personal cloud hanging in front of his face. He waves it off with his hand.

“A few times, yes,” she nods. “Coldharbour specifically.”

“The plane of Molag Bal?” Ulfey pales. He hasn't got balls *that* big. “That had to be a horrible experience.”

She chuckles: “The springtime landscape is worth seeing, though.”

“What?” Ulfey can't believe his ears. “Really?”

Lyris just looks at him bemusedly. When he doesn't seem to catch up, she says: “No.”

“Oh.” Awkward silence.

“Well I'm sure you are very busy. I can't keep you. Everyone in Riften is dying of horrible cough right now when you aren't there, so bye bye, go save them.” She even waves at him.

Ulfey gets the subtle hint, does a spin and with shoulders slacked he skates back to Riften. It would be a sad look to watch him depart if he didn't keep nearly falling over on his way.

Lyris drags the dead sabercat on the porch and leaves it hanging there as to be dealt later when she warms herself up a bit and gets her skinning and carving knives from the drawer.

She walks into the house like she owns the place, which she indeed does. Immediately a wave of warmth rolls over her, and once she closes the door she spends the next five minutes stripping all her protective layers down until she is standing there barefoot in just her tunic and breeches.

“Your braid has gone loose.”

“I don't give a damn, Tharn.” She blows some of the loose hair from her face and throws the letter, now even more crumpled, on the table. Meanwhile the annoying little man picks up her discarded coats, shoes, and mittens and puts them away. What crease is he trying to iron by that, Lyris wonders.

“Why are all three of my chairs placed under the cupboards?” she asks him wearily.

Tharn fixes his gaze on the couple of over-dried herbs hanging under the ceiling. “You store the pots and the kettle in the uppermost shelves.”

She frowns: “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Allow me to demonstrate.” He walks over to the nearest misplaced chair, and stands up on it. When he pulls himself up tiptoe it enables him to reach the latch which holds the cupboard closed. “Don't laugh at me. My father just was not endowed well enough to bed a giantess.”

Lyris does not laugh, although the corners of her mouth are twitching. “Well, I suppose he's really missed out then. Why were you getting the pots anyway.”

“Oh, well. I cooked.”

“Cooked what exactly?” During the time of the Five Companions it was usually Mannimarco who did the cooking. Later it was Cadwell. The point was she's never seen Tharn cooking, and she could not imagine him doing any sort of housework. She could imagine him summoning some banekins to do it for him. She is not exactly sure if she wants to eat anything that was possibly cooked by banekins.

“A roast beef in flatbread, but I had to improvise, because I didn't find actual beef nor the proper spices. It's roasted meat, anyway. The gravy includes mainly garlic, since aside garlic I've found only cinnamon and that did not feel proper.” He presents the dish to her. It looks surprisingly edible, the game meat – a stag if Lyriss recalls the inventory of her pantry correctly – is done very rare, but Lyriss does like her bites juicy, so nothing against that.

“That's a lot of flatbread. Never thought you one to get carried away with baking.”

“Um.” The look says it all.

Lyriss chuckles: “Honestly, flour-to-water ratio is a mystery even for me. I don't blame you here on that.” She pats him on the shoulder.

“I had to use a divination spell on that in the end.”

“Oh well. At least there's not dough for days to come. Have you eaten already?”

He assures her that yes, he didn't wait for her. With that, Lyriss sits down to eat, because she is indeed hungry like a wolf. When she is done with that, she reaches out for the letter.

Tharn who has been so far curious about the envelope quietly asks: “What is it?”

“Don't know,” Lyriss shrugs as she tears the envelope open. Tharn winces at that. “Surely it can't be anything good. I get written stuff only if there's trouble.”

She proceeds to read the letter carefully. It takes her some time because while the letters are clear and clean, the words themselves like to dance in front of her eyes and move about. She's never been a strong reader, but she is a determined one. She starts at the first big letter and cleaves her way through one word at a time until she reaches the final period.

The only thing that disturbs her in her reading is Tharn's gaze which intensifies as she is reaching the end of the letter. That is not that surprising, because she has gone several shades paler, of that she's aware. Once Lyriss reaches the end of the letter, it is not very long, she folds it back into the envelope and looks at Tharn: “It's from Sai. There's trouble. I have to leave as soon as possible.”

It meets with understanding. The old battlemage simply nods and hums. “Where?”

“Elsweyr. Rimmen.” That draws another wince from the man, but a different sort than the one he gave when she didn't use a letter opener on the envelope. This one was actually pained.

“What is it?”

“I don't know. Apparently he doesn't know either. But it's bad, it's done harm, and it can be fought, that's all I need to know.” She stands up and stretches her back. Her spine settles with satisfying crackling. “I'll leave tomorrow.”

Again, Tharn nods, but this time he doesn't say anything to that. Lyriss doesn't wait for him to come

up with something, instead she digs for her working tools and heads back outside. There is a dead sabercat to be dealt with. She can figure out what she's going to do with the man without him and elbow-deep in feline innards.



# Dream of Elsewhere

## Chapter Summary

The preparations to leave to Elsweyr might be not worth it, especially considered what the land of Khajit has in store of Lyris.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That evening she breaks out the mead again. She hasn't got a second horn, so Tharn has to drink from a mug. "I'm celebrating that I'm going to be rid of you," she explains when she pours herself again.

He nods at that. "Toast. To never seeing each other again."

After that they drink in silence. The mead is warming up and so is Lyris. Even Tharn has a slight flush to his cheeks when she opens the second bottle. He's slumped back into the chair and is swirling the mead in the mug. Oh, Divines, he's hitting the philosophical, isn't he? He is going to say: "I have been thinking recently," and follow with two hours of half-sensible shit. The last time he did that he built a very elaborate metaphor of the Empire based on a brothel. And before that he somehow reached the conclusion that had the circumstances been a bit different, Molag Bal would have been his patron Daedra, which is exactly what you want to hear when you rescue that son of a bitch from the Tower of Bones.

She helps herself to some more of the flatbread. It tastes of corn and garlic, it's not bad, but not exactly fitting to the mead. But she isn't going to repeat her yesterday mistake of forgetting to eat while drinking.

"You know," Tharn murmurs, watching the fire in hearth as if hypnotized, "I have been thinking recently."

Lyris groans. "That has to hurt."

He ignores that. "The ability to use magicka consists of three components. Your capability to contain the power and –"

"Tharn," says Lyris loud enough to put the howling wind outside to shame, "I'm not listening, and I don't give a damn about whatever idiocy you've come up with now. Shut up."

He blinks a few times and looks at her as though she has just slapped him across face. To be completely fair, telling Tharn to shut his mouth is the equivalent of that. "Oh." And then to save his grace, he adds: "It would be a waste of breath on you anyway."

More silence. By the sound of it, outside have all frost atronachs decided to marry just now. Lyris groans again. "The road is going to be a hell tomorrow."

"The road?" Tharn slowly stands up. He is not really drunk yet, but he is rubbing his knuckles, so he is definitely anywhere near sober either.

“Are you wasted out of your mind that you forgot I'm leaving tomorrow?” Lyris refills her horn again.

Tharn shakes his head, which he then considers a mistake as it makes him all wobbly and he has to sit back down. “I thought we were going to use a teleport.”

“Yes, the Rift is all snowed in, or so that swine-stabber bear lad – bear lard – Ulfey! - that's him, so he's told me.” She makes a vague gesture towards RIFTEN and chugs from her horn. “So I'm going to the mages. They've got their guild there. They could deliver a letter, they can deliver me. Hopefully, I'll keep my liver, though.” She giggles. “So not deliver, just send me. Like post. Ey, woss' with that stare, Tharn?”

He closes his eyes and rubs his temples. “Nothing, it's just... I can teleport you. Us. I was counting with that. Not all the way to RIMMEN,” he sweeps the idea off with a flickering motion of his hand, “I'm not going back to RIMMEN. But Riverhold is just a short travel from there, and I won't have to cross half of a desert to get home from there.”

Now it is Lyris turn to stare at him. “You haven't mentioned this.”

“Well, I thought it so logical that it didn't occur to me that you weren't planning on this.”

Both the horn and the mug are begging for another round, so she serves them. That is the second bottle gone. “I haven't thought of that.”

“I still have to leave, just like you do. What were you planning on doing with me? Leaving me here?” He seems a bit offended by that idea.

A chuckle: “I was planning to drag you to RIFTEN and marry you to Ulfey's sister.”

“She hardly deserves that.”

“Oh, you don't know her,” Lyris sips her mead. “Her crimes are horrible. You'd fit each other like chicken and rice.”

“Excuse you, Titanborn, I am an absolute delight to have around.” When it is met only with pouting, he sighs and says something about going to sleep.

The warrior – no longer a hunter, a warrior again – finishes the bottle she's just started before she concludes that the world is spinning a bit too much and if she can't feel her tongue even when she bites it it is calling for a break.

She makes her way over to the bed and drops herself down as tall and wide as she is. The covers are nicely warm and before she knows it she is burrowed deep in the sheets and furs like a wood mite in graht-oak.

“Oh Stendarr have mercy,” she notices a faint mumble somewhere to her left ear. Funny that a wall can speak.

The bed creaks and the mattress wobbles as some weight shifts to the far edge and then rolls off completely. There is a grace-lacking thud of a tipsy lightweight man hitting the wooden floor accompanied by a choked-down pained hiss. Or maybe that were the two rats who made their home behind the dressing cabinet, screwing the life out of each other again.

Lyris's last coherent thought she remembers before falling asleep is that she ought to get a cat to deal with the rats for once and for good. A cat with fur thick and wiry, like Sai's beard. Mmm,

she'd like to tangle fingers in that beard... pull his head down... mmm... wrap a leg around his waist... what a kitten...

The following morning is not pleasant. When she manages it out of the bed, she notices Tharn already sitting at the table, staring deeply at nothing which happens to be somewhere between the cast iron kettle and the wall opposite him. When he notices she is up, he acknowledges it with a grunt and pours tea from the kettle to the other mug on the table.

“Don't” Lyris starts with a couple of difficulties when she makes her way to the table, “say a word.” She fully expects him to have comments on how she cannot handle her morning hanging and that she ought not to drink if she is not able to hold it and whatsoever and all things considered, but he actually doesn't say a word and just pushes the tea towards her. Somehow that is even worse than any snippy comment.

It's a black tea, strong enough to kick in teeth like a horse. Once Lyris regains her sense of taste, she can make out the bittergreen in it. It's horrible. After the second mug her head stops pounding. Halfway through the fourth – Tharn had to put the kettle on again to make her the fourth mug – she can even focus her eyes. She can even make up the subtle changes.

For example the fact that Tharn has shaved. Over the three weeks he's grown something that was too long to be a stubble but too short to be a beard, now it's back to his horrible pointy chin-lining whatever-beard. The basin of dishes from yesterday has been emptied, considering that there is a chair under one of the cupboards, she should thank Tharn for that. Windows have been barred in preparations for leaving for an extended period of time.

In a way it makes her inexplicably angry.

She stands up, feeling horribly heavy. “I need to get some things to pack,” she mumbles as she heads towards the back door.

“The rainwater barrel shouldn't have more than a digit-thick lid of ice,” Tharn replies to that and doesn't look away from whatever interesting crack in wall he is studying.

Is she that easy to see through? Lyris walks outside and the cold wind bites into her. It's sobering. And cold. Mainly cold.

The rainwater barrel indeed is not frozen completely though as it was yesterday. The ice on the surface is dark and smooth, reflective like a mirror. From within the dark depth, Lyris's dark mirror image is repaying her a look. Tangle of hair, half of her braid has gone wild, bags under eyes, scar across half of her face, a few wrinkles, some of them she hasn't seen before. An ugly frown. She frowns even more and makes a face at herself.

With a deep breath and eyes closed, her forehead hits the ice. It shatters to pieces and she sinks up to shoulders into the freezing water. She screams, feels the bubbles of air escaping out around her cheeks and ears. When Lyris pulls her head out of the water, she is completely out of breath, shivering with cold, and most importantly of all, feeling like a human being once again.

She heads back inside before she can give herself a frostbite bigger than Tamriel. Just in time to get a view of Tharn's bare ass as he is changing to his old clothing. If Lyris was to freak out every time she saw a man in some sort of undress, she wouldn't have made it in the army. That's why she keeps her cool and only judges the wound the man has on his side.

When Ulfey saw it for the first time, he whistled in disbelief. At the time it was a long gash with ripped edges, going from waist across the hip to the upper third of Tharn's thigh, and it looked ugly even though it was not bleeding at the moment. "The heat has baked the wound sealed. Good for him, but now I have to rip the scab and crust away. I bet he's grateful not to be awake for that."

Now there is a thick pale-red line in the place and Ulfey's precious needlework which holds the skin and flesh together. If the two of them stayed here, Ulfey would drop by the next week and take the stitches out. Suddenly Lyris has a lot of second thoughts on letting Tharn going alone all the way from Riverhold to his home in Nibenay, wherever exactly that is. The hip might not hurt him much – or maybe he's just pretending it doesn't hurt that badly, Lyris doesn't know and doesn't care as long as he's not whining – but it certainly isn't healed enough to strain it with days of walking or riding horseback.

She discards the thought. She'll build that bridge when she is in need of burning something. Instead she herself gets dressed. That in itself is a feat, because nothing out of her wardrobe is made for warm weather. Or southern-than-Skyrim warm type of weather, because by the Nord definition as long as your water is liquid, the weather is fairly mild.

She ends up in her old armour. Tharn's expression is very judging. Lyris snaps at him: "What?"

"When was the last time you have seen yourself in the mirror, Titanborn?"

Lyris puts her hands on her hips and menacingly looms forward. "You yourself aren't a picture out of a steamy calendar either, Tharn."

"Perhaps," he admits, "but I had to mend all my clothes and weld my armour together in your back garden. Considered the situation given, I couldn't look any better. My question still stands, however."

"Tsk." She turns away and pulls out her travelling bag to start packing. "Like I give in to such frivolities."

"Owning one mirror is not a frivolity, Titanborn." Tharn leans on the wall and inspects the dents in his gauntlet. He takes it off and rubs the problematic part with his hand until the metal begins to glow in a dim red. "Owning none, though, is one of the signs of depression, or so I believe I have read somewhere."

Lyris growls: "If you are going to keep this up –"

"Oh, come on," he chuckles, "I thought that for Sai Sahan you'd make... some sort of an effort." The smile he has is one a tiger could wear on its face.

"And just what," she turns slowly back to him, her voice sharp as a razor, "is that to you?"

Tharn raises one hand in defence: "Nothing." He puts the fixed gauntlet back on once it cools down enough. "I genuinely hope it works out for the two of you." When Lyris squints eyes at him, suspicion basically dripping liquid off her brow, he adds: "Knowing you two, you'll be with children without even knowing when it happened, you'll have to settle down and for another fifteen years that will be two heavily armed lunatics less to run around Tamriel. Oh, don't look at me like that, why do you think my family married me off as soon as it was possible? Granted, it did not work out, as I am too clever to fall for such an obvious and transparent scheme."

"Instead you now have army of children."

"Grandchildren, Titanborn, mostly Grandchildren now. And I wouldn't call them an army, they

barely make a battalion. Are you quite ready?"

Lyris puts her backpack on the table. She hasn't packed much, but it is still quite heavy. "Do you really think I look that badly?" She shouldn't be showing any signs of vulnerability around that bastard, but it's been gnawing on her mind from the moment he said it, and it wouldn't go away without some reassurance.

Tharn smiles sourly: "You look like a wyrd witch." When he notices Lyris's face reddening, he adds: "Oh, for Divines' sake, come here. You have to have a comb in here somewhere." His gauntlets clang on the table, and Lyris's armour creaks as she sinks into a chair.

The following ten minutes feel quite surreal, to the both of them. Tharn is combing Lyris's hair, untangling the strands and putting them to order. It's a wild mess, but at least it's not horribly greasy and beyond saving. When he is finally through it and begins braiding it, he says: "When I was younger, I tried to wear my hair in a plait too, I believe I haven't told you that."

"Have you? What happened to that?" Lyris has her eyes closed. From time to time there is a slightly painful tug in her hair, but overall...It... feels nice. Oddly nice. Peaceful. She could have someone doing her hair for her more often.

Tharn mumbles: "My sister Oliva told me that I haven't got the face for wearing a braid. That was back in the time when I cared what people think of my appearance, and when I came to my senses, I no longer had enough hair to find braiding it anywhere near reasonable."

"For someone who doesn't wear it surely you know how to braid it."

"It's not hard," he hums. "And besides I have many daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughters. And male successors who feel experimental with their fashion." He throws the braid around her shoulder. There is a red ribbon at the end holding it together. "There. Can we go now?"

"It was you who didn't deem me presentable," Lyris stands up and stretches her back.

"And it was you who nearly threw a fit because of it."

"I was nowhere near throwing a fit."

"Whatever delusion helps you to retain your sanity and keeps your fists out of my face, Titanborn," Tharn's expression is the one of absolute innocence. He's pressed his hands together and now when he takes them apart, it is as if he was parting a curtain. A glowing portal shimmers in the air. "After you," he adds with a nod.

No matter how many times you have done it, travelling through a portal remains to be an experience beyond all descriptions. Varen, who's always had a very specific way with words, once described it this way: "It's like somebody is trying to pull my liver out through my teeth. But in a pleasant way." If you ask Lyris, there is no pleasant way to pull one's liver out through their teeth, so she is really grateful that at least the transportation doesn't last long.

When she appears in Nirn again, the first what she feels is the hot air which is brimming with anticipation. A storm is going to break out any time soon, she suspects. She opens her eyes to inspect her surroundings.

She finds herself standing by a shrine of very obvious Khajiiti origin. The marlstone is a bit

faded, but otherwise it is very nice. The thin dried trees all around are a strange choice in aesthetics, but who is she to judge, probably it is to express the duality of death and nature or something. The sand meditation circles around it haven't seen any care in some time, though. She looks at the footprints – long and thin, definitely not reminding of any feet she knows.

“Would you look at this...” she ponders out loud.

Behind her, Tharn groans: “In a minute. Ugh.” She turns around to see him leaning forehead-first on the wall of a nearby house. He is looking very pale.

“Are you sure you are alright?”

“Yes,” he pants. “Yes, I only... expected to be in a better shape by now. I am not going to faint, don't worry.” A flash of light in the sky.

“Is that a hangover?” Her voice is nearly drowned in the following thunder

He looks up at her, eyes squinted to let in as little light as possible. “No, Titanborn, I know my limits. Only portals are slightly more draining on me than they used to be. I thought I've recovered enough not to feel it, but it seems that I have mistaken.” Lyris remembers the state she found him in when she took him in her home, and does not press the matter any further.

Tharn on the other hand looks around in a dazed confusion. “Where is *everyone*?”

“Inside, I suppose,” Lyris shrugs and wipes off the first raindrops. “They are sensible people, these Khajiits, not standing outside in rain –”

“But this place is always full of people,” Tharn mumbles, “that's why I brought us here. I thought that nobody would notice me in the crowd and...” He voice falters. “And what are these?”

“Trees?” Lyris offers.

“They weren't here the last time I was around. And that is fairly recently,” he says. And then: “Down!”

Lyris doesn't question him and drops to a squat. Above her head she hears *shwoon* as something long, thin and sharp swings through the place where her shoulders were just a moment ago. She is holding her axe before she even realizes it.

Those are no trees. There is no point in correcting her statement. Trees usually don't move. And if they do, they haven't got large bug eyes. Or very sharp carapaces. Whatever those large insects are, there is a lot of them and they seem to be going after Lyris and Tharn.

A quick swing proves that they aren't as sturdy as they seem, not when they meet with Lyris's battle axe. A jab from one of them, however, proves that those thin pincers are very sharp and can go through chainmail.

There is no nice way to put it: They are overwhelmed. There is just too many of them. The rain makes everything slippery and the sand is not a stable ground to fight on. Lyris is on her knees more often that she is standing.

“Get behind me!” Tharn hurls spells one after the other in quick succession, adding in a kick from time to time for a good measure. Without his staff he is practically weapon-less.

“Tharn, there is no –”

“Lyris, now!” For a split-second Lyris sees to his face and notices the fiery glow.

Without thinking twice, she rolls over until her shoulder, the one that didn't get pierced through, hits Tharn's heel. The ground there is solid, if a bit slippery and hot, and it cracks under her weight when she pulls herself up. Raindrops sizzle and evaporate around her.

One of those overgrown mutated praying mantises takes a step towards them and she cuts its head in half before its legs can even touch the glass she is now standing on. It explodes in an ugly splatter of carapace and oozy bile.

Behind her, Tharn growls at the oncoming enemies: “Burn.” And they do.

## Chapter End Notes

Don't ask me why, I just view caring for someone else's hair and letting someone else care for your hair as... a special sort of intimacy.

## Interlude: The Unbearable Weightlessness of Being (by S. Sahan)

### Chapter Summary

Sai Sahan's observations on the Company during their journey alongside the Rimmen militia to Riverhold, as well as a terrible book reference and a fighting action in Riverhold.

The militia is approaching the Hill of Shattered Sword at steady pace as the dark stormy clouds gather above the north of Anequina. There is something in the rhythmic sound of two hundred boots and two hundred paws hitting dry cobblestone at the same time that makes Sai Sahan uneasy. At least the horses fall out of the rhythm. He looks over the soldiers marching: a Queen's Claw, then two Cygnus Irregulars, and a Queen's Claw again. Fifty lines of quadruplets, two hundred fighters proficient as both marksmen and melee fighters.

Not to forget Lord Aquilarios, Cadwell, Prefect Calo, The Green Lady, himself, the Silvenar, Clivia Tharn, and Zamarak. Except for Cadwell, everyone of the aforementioned is mounted. Cadwell, strictly technically speaking, is also mounted, in that sense he is carrying his bantam guar on his head. Sai Sahan does not question him; he is not certain he would like the answer, were he able to understand it at all. He finds the presence of Honour, as Cadwell never forgets to mention his *noble steed* is named, less questionable than the presence... of some others.

Why the Prefect and Zamarak are with the militia is clear. They are leading it. Cadwell... Well, the old soul shriven wanted to be involved and that was a reason good enough for everyone, and besides they would not be able to stop him if he did not want to be stopped. As for the emissaries from the Valenwood, the Silvenar has expressed his opinion that because the Bosmer and the Khajiit are political allies, he should help them personally. While his skills as a diplomat are second to none, Sai Sahan has more trust in the Green Lady's fighting skills, for she is as ferocious and persistent as the nature itself. The Green Lady has come, because the Silvenar has come. He asked Tharn yesterday what is her reason. She looked him dead in the eye and said: "I want to kill things. Better the Mantis than you, I suppose." And thus only Lord Aquilarios's presence was a mystery to him, but one does not question Lord Aquilarios.

Sai Sahan slows the horse to catch up with Lord Aquilarios, the Green Lady, Silvenar, and Tharn who are currently closing the whole formation.

"I still don't understand," Tharn is currently saying while examining one of her many blades, "why you cannot deal with him by hiring an assassin. Saves you a great deal of trouble."

The Green Lady scoffs: "We don't have your Imperial assassins. We don't need them."

"On the contrary," Lord Aquilarios chuckles. It is good to see him shaved again, although he has not cut his hair yet, and so his head is still surrounded by the wispy white halo. His unseeing eyes glint as the first lighting strikes. "Except in Elden Root they call them quarter-pounder assassins. Do you know why?"

Sai Sahan knows what is coming, and he has to smile. His beard, however, conceals the betrayal of his stoic facade. Still, he is obliged to assist his Lord to deliver the horrible hackneyed punchline: "Why?"



“Because the Bosmer haven't converted to the metric system yet.” Admirably the man manages to say it with his face completely straight. Sai, on the other hand, finds it hard not to laugh, and his shoulders keep bobbing in the place.

There is a terrible silence for a beat into which only rain begins to splatter on their backs and on the ground.

Then the Silvenar begins laughing, and he laughs and laughs until he is crying and the strength leaves his body and he loses the grips on the reins of his horse and he falls down onto the road and he is still laughing, even when the marching men and women turn around to see if he is alright and the Green Lady stops her horse and his horse and slides from the saddle to the ground to help him up.

“I do not know what you have done to him,” she says once everyone is somewhat capable to continue on their way, “but if it caused any lasting damage, I will skin you and make shoes out of your hide.”

“I disapprove,” Cadwell announces his presence besides them, even though he wasn't there three seconds ago, because Sai Sahan saw him happily chatting with Zamarak at the front of the convoy. “Human skin is terribly soft, my dear, you'd walk through it in no time. You could spare the cobbler and walk around barefoot.”

The Green Lady does not point out to him that she already is barefoot, even on the burning sands of Elsweyr. And neither does anybody else.

Tharn snarls and growls through her gritted teeth: “You do realize we are about to face one of the Mantis swarm-mothers and are very likely to die?” The sodden hair stuck to her face make her angry expression less threatening and more comical, but nobody dares to laugh.

“Your point being?” The cold rain has apparently helped the Silvenar to recover from his laughing fit.

“That you should act seriously and stop kidding around, referencing poorly written books of fiction, for a starter.”

“On my travels I have not yet found a well written book of fiction I could reference in anticipation of painful death in the hands of otherworldly insect,” states Sai Sahan.

Save for Clivia Tharn, the rest of the company snorts. The ex-Empress-regent takes offence: “I tire of your company,” and speeds off to the front where Prefect Calo and Zamarak are riding side by side in comfortable silence, enjoying the view as the Shattered Swords give way to the river.

“And therefore she exchanges us for a known bookworm and deadly philosopher,” Lord Aquilarios sighs and shakes his head.

“Hopefully she will not realize her mistake until we reach Riverhold,” the Green Lady hums in agreement. “I enjoy her company, but only from a respectful distance. Preferably out of eye's sight.”

“I detest to say it, but she makes me miss her father,” Sai Sahan nods in agreement.

Cadwell pats him on the knee: “What a sentiment, it could almost bring one back from the dead, eh? What is it, oh great Prophet? Too soon?”

Varen has halted his horse, pearly eyes fixed onto something in the distance only the blind can see.

“No. Fire.”

“Smoke on the horizon!” Zamarak shouts almost at the same time, but still a fraction of second later.

Like one man the entire company spurs the horses into canter while the militia adjusts their marching tempo to a light jog. They have been expecting the enemy at Riverhold just fine, but they did not expect the Mantis to set fire to it.

When they arrive a few minutes later, Riverhold is in chaos. The buildings are not burning, Stendarr be praised for his mercy, but scorched or blazing Mantis are running around, lacking any manner of organization. The high pitched shrieking of pain makes any orientation or even thinking hard, and through the heavy curtains of rain, dark clouds of smoke, and falling ash and cinders it is hard to see anything.

The militia moves through the streets, slaying any Mantis they run into, making their way slowly but surely to the House of Histories where the swarm-mother of this hive made its nest. Sai Sahan refuses to think about the swarm-mother as a *her*. He does not give it the benefit of thinking of it as anything else than animal.

The ground is shaking under their feet, cracking under the rain is thought it was completely dried. When Sai's feet slip on too smooth surface and his hands search for support, he realizes that the soil has been completely dried, even though the recent weather has been more than favourable.

He also realizes that what he has slipped on is... “Glass!” he shouts to warn the others, but not before the Green Lady and Zamarak meet the same fate as he.

The ground shakes again and then the House of Histories loses all its windows and also the roof. It is gone in smoke and steam and rains down in splinters along with gallons of Mantis hemolymph.

Behind Sai Sahan, Tharn gags. “I am going to need a thorough bath after this. Or no, make it two baths,” she adds as there is a metallic clang when a large piece of falling black carapace hits her armour.

“Nice helmet,” comments the Silvenar.

Amid the smoke and ash in the doorway is something moving. The Green Lady and Zamarak both ready their bows. When the stirring comes again, they both release their arrows at the same time.

There is a glint of steel in the darkness followed by the double sound of bone and metal meeting another metal.

Then the darkness rasps: “If that son of a horker whose fires one more bloody arrow in my general direction, I'll take it and stuff it up their ass!” A pause, heavy cough and creaking of the wood under heavy footsteps.

Then a different voice adds: “And if it was Zamarak, I'll snap his bow in half and garrotte him with the string.”

Two creatures, one big and strong and one rather fragile and small, tethered to its side, make it out of the House of Histories. They are of a humanoid shape, although nothing else can be said about them for certain, as they are covered head to toe in the mixture of ashes, Mantis hemolymph and their own blood. Not even the rain is able to break through that crust.

The smaller of the creatures, approximately of Lord Aquilarios's size, is heavily limping, dragging left leg behind.

Despite the direct threat – or maybe because of it, Sai Sahan is not willing to make a bet on this – Zamarak's bow is ready to fire again.

Out of nowhere, Cadwell appears and cheerfully hops to the two apparitions, pulling the taller of them into a hug. “Lyris, charming as always! And Abnur, so happy to see you, old chap!”

Abnur Tharn, the not-very-proud owner of the voice number two, breathes out: “Hello, Cadwell. Why am I not even – cough – surprised to find you here?” He doesn't have even enough patience to wait for the answer, and falls forward.

Snow Lily manages to catch him before he hits the ground, and pulls him up with a grunt. “Anyone in here a medic? I'm afraid his stitches have come loose.”

# Wash the Pain Away

## Chapter Summary

Question: How many people can you stuff into one bathroom before it becomes absurd?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Cygnus Irregulars are an unit organized well enough to make a stretched without even being directly ordered to. Vazbi, one of the members of the Queen's Claws, is currently assisting Varen with sewing Tharn's hip back together. Given the sudden cussing coming from the tent they have retreated to to do so, Tharn's has finally come to and is not happy with his current situation.

That still means there has been half an hour of remote peace when Sai sat Lyris down and asked: "I am overjoyed to see you, Snow Lily, but I am afraid we have a lot to catch up on. Do I start, or would you like to go first?"

Lyris doesn't know what she would tell him, or how she would put it, so she only sighs. "You've called for me and I came as fast as I could. Tell me what is going on in here. I have already punched these bug bitches through thorax, I might at least know what they are."

"Perhaps this one can explain better," Zamarak's voice is soft and soothing, a balm for Lyris's ears. She nods at him and he continues: "We call these creatures the Mantis. They have appeared a month ago in the wake of a group of Ghost Cats crossing the Scar."

Lyris halts him: "What are the ghost cats?"

Sai's brow furrows. "The superstitious nature of locals – no offence to you, Zamarak – makes it that their true name is not spoken unless the moons can protect you. They are spirits of the Khajiits who came to Namira after their deaths. Usually, that is."

"Moon-Bishop Sizenza," Zamarak enters with his voice made of snow and mead, "has entered the dreams of one of the Ghost Cats the priests were able to capture. She returned with the message that these moon-haters do not come from Namiira. Alas, where they do come from she could not say. Someplace else, that is all we know. This one suspects a foul game played here, one its rules he does not understand."

"Lord Aquilarios proposed that I reach out to you and ask you to aid this cause. The Silvenar has contacted every member of all three Alliances across Tamriel, but they refused to see past their nose," Sai adds. "At this very moment, whatever is going to is problem only for Elsweyr. What they fail to realize is that the Mantis and the lost spirits are not attacking Elsweyr, but all of Tamriel. Elsweyr is simply the place where they initiated their offensive."

"So everyone else is feeling too important playing politics for the highly uncomfortable chair, and the moment this becomes their problem, it's already too late. And if we manage to stop it, nobody's going to even thank us, maybe except a bunch of Khajiits. Given they survive all of this."

"That is correct," Zamarak nods curtly. Then he moves over to make place in their little circle for Prefect Calo.

The Imperial sits down, ashen in face, and reaches into the bag behind him. He produces a bottle of liquor which Lyris fails to identify, opens it and takes a reasonable big swig. He pants, closes the bottle, and still wide-eyed he announces to everybody: "I have worked with the Chancellor before and I've come to understand his pragmatism has nothing much to do in regard to his health, but until just now I've thought that these two have at least some common ground."

Varen slowly makes his way to them. Without even thinking about it, Calo hands him the bottle. After a careful sniff, Varen takes a cautious sip and promptly breaks into cough. "Better. Thank you," he says once he can catch his breath.

Lyris pulls a face. "I'll bite. What did he do?"

"Abnur's lost nerves and patience and cauterized the wound himself instead of letting me to sew it shut." Calo puts the bottle away. "I think that I'll pass on any roasted meat for the foreseeable future." Then his eyes finally focus on Lyris: "I'm afraid we haven't been introduced. Prefect Calo, leading the Cygnus Irregulars as it is. At your service, as long as you aren't going to betray the Empire and mean no harm the Queen Khamira, that is." He gives as good salute as a man sitting hunched and pulling knees to his chest can give.

"Lyris, called Titanborn by some. I suppose it is nice to meet you, given the circumstances."

The Prefect nods. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Really?" she grins. "All lies, let me assure you. The boys tend to exaggerate."

"I am not exactly keen on finding out whether or not is your right hook as impeccable as I were told it is," Calo smiles weakly. "If you excuse me, I have men to see. If we are finished in here and everyone is awake, I would like it for us to return to Rimmen before the sun sets. I'll order the militia to prepare for departure."

He steps out of the tent, and then a moment later his head peeks back in: "Did you really blow up the swarm-mother?"

"Yeah. We did."

Calo shakes his head. "Unbelievable," he whispers, and then leaves. They can hear him shouting commands outside.

Thankfully it has stopped raining. The downpour has cleaned them all somewhat, but as the Green Lady doesn't fail to mention every ten minutes, they are in a dire need of bath, she most of all. Lyris doubts the last part of her statement, because she can at least see what the Lady's skin is in colour, unlike herself.

At least her shoulder has been cleaned and patched, Zamarak is quite good with those bandages of his. He's put something on it and now she doesn't even feel it, even though that mere moments ago it hurt like mother of all bitches. She also feels slightly light-headed and chatty.

Currently everyone is heading to Rimmen. With the exception of Tharn and herself, it is *back* to Rimmen. Sai, Zamarak, and Clivia are at the front, the two Bosmer she doesn't know, Varen and Tharn are a little group to the side, she, Calo and Cadwell are walking behind the militia at the

back.

In theory Calo has his own horse, but after the first three hundred metres he took of it and told Tharn to ride it instead. A lot can be said about Tharn's shape that he didn't even try to argue that he is fine and can walk perfectly on his own. Currently Varen and the mer are making sure he doesn't collapse or fall off. He's fighting to keep his consciousness valiantly, but everyone is aware that he is just postponing the inevitable.

“And I nearly let him go all the way back to Cyrodiil on his own,” Lyris mumbles before she can stop herself.

That catches Calo's attention: “He wasn't planning on going with you?”

“No,” Lyris shakes her head. “That is why he teleported us to Riverhold in the first place, he did not intend to go to Rimmen at all. His argument was that Sai asked me and not him.”

“Well, that is perfectly understandable,” Cadwell hums. He would nod, but then Honour would fall off his helmet, so he doesn't do that. “Khamira is still pretty crossed with him that fled before the coronation like a little schoolboy. She hasn't taken his sudden departure well. Hm, both of them, in fact.”

“What both departures?” Lyris questions. Cadwell has the horrible habit of assuming that everyone knows what he knows, and as a result he fails to give important context. The leaps in conclusions he takes seem often very illogical and even random because of that, unless you are Lyris who asks what the hell is Cadwell talking about exactly.

“Oh, hasn't Abnur told you?”

“I don't know if you have noticed, but the two of us aren't exactly on speaking terms most of the time.”

Calo mutters: “He was presumed dead.”

“What?!” A couple of the soldiers turn around to see what the commotion is, but when they realize it is just Lyris losing her godsdamned mind, they continue merrily along their way.

“Two years ago when the whole trouble with the dragons here happened, Tharn helped to put an end to it. In the process he delved into the middle of an explosion to contain it, or so Sai Sahan told me,” Calo states matter-of-factly. By now Lyris is used to Imperials enough to understand that he is putting on that facade to mask the fact he is definitely not okay with it. “He went into the fire and did not come back out. Some pieces of melted armour were found as well as his staff burned to a crisp. Lots of ashes and melted metal, basically. He had to be successful to some extent, however, because the devastation was nowhere near the scale of an explosion. And definitely not the explosion of a fully charged dragonfire.”

Lyris is silent for a very long time, trying to fight back the growing anger. “Well,” she hisses finally, “he failed to mention that. Or anything about the dragons for that matter.” She adjusts her tempo to walk faster than the marching militia. “Excuse me, I need to talk to Sai.”

“I'll let him know,” Cadwell sprints past her to the front, leaving behind a trail of dust glittering like fallen stars.

Prefect Calo is looking at their backs with the expression of utter betrayal, because now he is going to walk by himself and inevitably get bored.

Sai and Lyris meet somewhere between the front and the middle, because Lyris has long legs and walks very quickly, especially when there is anger fuelling her. “Yes, my Snow Lily? Something troubles you?”

“No. Tharn's just pissed me off. He should've said!” Lyris is practically steaming like an over-boiling pot of potatoes.

“Said what?”

“That he nearly burned himself to death. Argh! I can't believe that. He says he is so clever when he is so stupid.” She spits on the ground, then she turns to Sai with a murder and accusation in her eyes: “And I can't believe you *just let him*.”

Sai Sahan keeps solemn silence for a long time, head bowed. Finally he sighs: “He didn't tell me what the consequences would be. I thought he knew what he was doing. And I suppose he knew it, in the end. I was certain he died there, however. I understood his sacrifice and I mourned for him. Had I known...” His beard puffs as he lets out a sharp exhale and turns to the side where Tharn, the Bosmer, and Veren are. “He could at least send a message that he is fine.”

“He definitely wasn't fine when I found him,” Lyris says, voice sour enough to match raw bittergreen. “It took nearly to weeks for him to wake up. He had the strangest fever I've ever seen, I could boil a kettle on him. I tried that.”

Sai snorts at that. She continues: “Yesterday, when your letter came in, he seemed to be fine enough, you know? He offered to take me here and that he would continue home on his own.” Her face drops. “He didn't tell me he had seen you at all. I've heard something about the dragons two years ago but...”

“Yes, two years ago was when he disappeared. I haven't heard of him until today.” Sai smiles.

“Are you two bad-mouthing the irresponsibility of our battlemage?” Varen chuckles. Lyris looks to her left in surprise and so does Sai. Neither of them noticed when the blind man has joined them. “I tried to get out of him where he's been, but he is barely awake. In the rare moments when he understood what I was saying he was unable to put a coherent sentence together.”

“I'm just glad his ribs haven't cracked again,” Lyris sighs. “Burning his flesh just to get rid of that scratch really had to take a toil on him. Hmm... Sai, you said he contained an explosion of dragonfire?” Sai confirms it for her. Lyris's forehead crinkles with heavy worries: “I suppose that would explain it. If he contained, the fire still has to be inside of him, right?”

Varen, who has the greatest understanding of magic between the three of them, gasps. “Oh. Oh no. If you are thinking what I am thinking – But that would kill him, wouldn't it? A human body can withstand dragonfire for only a short period of time and only in very small amount. But he's been holding a fully charged all-destroying explosion in himself for two years.”

“By all accounts he *should* be dead.” Sai's face is unreadable, and Lyris is not sure whether he is only stating a fact or his momentary wish.

“He seems to be recovering rather quickly,” Varen smiles as his ears pick up the elven laughter from the other side. “I am bound to coax the answers out of him during the dinner.”

“Dinner has to wait after a bath. Divines know I need one,” Lyris grumbles.

She realizes she should be impressed by the Rimmens palace and lowkey she feels bad that she isn't amazed even in the slightest. After you've visited the Imperial Palace in Cyrodiil so many times that the building becomes mundane for you, you are only rarely amazed by skilfully done architecture and decoration. It doesn't stop you, however, from appreciating the craftsmanship. Lyris herself in particular is adoring all the details on the sculptures and filigree. In the north she didn't get to see much decoration, and the contrast of Khajiiti focus on aesthetics takes her breath away for a moment.

They are greeted by a Khajiit woman black as ebony dressed in silk and gold. "Dark Moons, what happened to you?" she asks when she sees them.

Prefect Calo and Zamarak salute to her in unison. Interestingly enough, Calo's salute is the Khajiit bowed with clasped hands, not the fingers-flick-the-forehead she gave to Lyris during their curt introduction. "Your Majesty," he reports, "Tharn blew up the swarm-mother, and our mission was successful. Our men have not suffered any loss and only minor injuries."

"And Abazbi's caught flu in the heavy rain," Zamarak mumbles almost inaudibly.

The report surprises the Queen: "Clivia Tharn blew the swarm-mother? This one is most impressed by her skill then."

Zamarak ribs his eyes and shakes his head. "No, not Clivia Tharn."

"But the Prefect has just said –" Then she spots Tharn who's been making a good attempt to hide behind Sai and Lyris. Immediately her expression changes, although Lyris cannot make sense of what it means. "By Jone's light, this is the most unexpected reunion."

Tharn coughs up the last remaining cinders from his lungs and murmurs: "No one is more surprised than I am."

The Queen of Anequina folds her hands behind her back and takes a few deep breaths. Eventually her tail stops swishing from side to side. Lyris is very impressed, she's never seen anyone to calm themselves down so quickly. Then the Queen says: "I am certain we all have things to talk about. I suggest we do so after dinner when you have refreshed yourself. I will have the palace servants to prepare the rooms for both," she acknowledges Lyris with a nod, "new arrivals. And have towels drawn up for all of you. A lot of towels." She mutters the last sentence, but everyone hears her nevertheless.

With that they are dismissed until dinner. Lyris carefully follows Sai and waits until they are around the corner to ask him where the bathroom is.

"There are two. Well, more, but two in the guest wing. The eastern is just down the hall, the last door on your right. The western is up the flight of stairs and right on the left, but I have noticed Lord Aquilarios and Tharn – Clivia Tharn, that is – heading there. In your place I would use the eastern bathroom."

And so Lyris is equipped with a large towel and a bath robe, and she makes her way to the eastern bathroom as advised.

The bathroom consists of two rooms. In the first there is a wooden pail with cold water, pumice, and mountains of bathing sand. Lyris takes use of them and scrubs herself clean until she can no longer feel the stench of burned chitin. Once done, she ties her hair high up and slips through the door to the second room where the actual bath is.



The sunken bath is large enough to be considered a small pool, made from red marble and full of water so hot it is steaming. It also contains Prefect Calo who has his back turned to her and is hunched over a book, elbows rested on the edge of the bath to keep his hands and the pages dry.

He flips to the next page and asks: "Which of the girls made it to the western first? The Lady, or Clivia?"

"Clivia," Lyris mumbles. "Um, do you mind if I –"

"I don't care in particular," the man shakes his head. "As long as you don't get the book wet. The ink loves to smudge and I would prefer not to have my library rights revoked."

That was not what Lyris had in mind, but whatever. She needs the bath and she doesn't give a damn she has to share it with a man. She slips into the water and sends ripples across the surface to all sides. The water is hot enough to make her skin tingle and redden with blood. Oh Divines yes, yes! Yesssss. She lets out a half-moan which could be as well a purr. Already she intends to stay in here until her skin goes wrinkly like a raisin or until there is calling to dinner, whichever comes first.

She feels all the tension and accumulated kinks in her muscles dissolving in the hot water. She almost feels like falling asleep until the very moment she hears the door creak. A couple of minutes later, after the sound of profound scrubbing from the next room has come to its end, Zamarak appears at the edge of the bath.

"This one apologizes," he mumbles, "but he will have to bathe with you."

Calo looks up: "I thought that you share the bathroom with Khamira, now that you are engaged."

"This one does, yes," he nods, "but Queen Khamira expressed her wish to cleanse herself and Zamarak thinks it proper to give her the privacy. She is Zamarak's beloved second, and the Queen of Anequina first. And the western bathroom is unfortunately occupied."

Lyris huffs: "What is the deal with the western bathroom anyway?"

Zamarak doesn't flush but only because he has fur from the tip of his ears to the claws of his toes. Calo, however, without losing composure, explains: "It's very much like this one, but it has a rather large marble block placed in the centre of the bath. When the bath is full, the block is completely submerged in water, but if you lay your back on it, you still keep your head above the water."

Zamarak adds: "Upon construction it was intended as a table for refreshment."

"It still gets used as a table."

After that remark, Zamarak gives Calo a very long and tired look, and finally he concludes: "You Imperials must be very desperate in your love making."

"We are bloody bureaucrats. We make do."

The door open again and enters the the Bosmer woman whom everyone calls the Green Lady, although Lyris sees nothing particularly green about her. She jumps into the water without any hint of shame and as a way of explanation or perhaps excuse she says: "The other two are in the west, and my Silvenar has his nose buried too deeply in that precious book of his to care for it or for me."

"I envy him the ability to keep reading regardless of the situation," Calo sighs wistfully and returns to his book. Lyris and Zamarak make themselves more comfortable along the edges of the bath,

while the Green Lady keeps completely sinking unto the hot water, coming out only when she is in desperate need of air.

Lyris waits for one of the rare moments when the elf's ears are above the water to strike a little conversation with her. She is mostly curious, and quickly finds that the Bosmer could hardly be any more down to earth person whose love for the Silvenar, who is her spouse, and nature could not be any greater. She finds her to be a delightful person and hopes the sympathy is returned. She has this feeling that if the sympathy was not returned, she would know it by now.

More time comes to pass and just as Lyris wonders if she could get any more comfortable, the door open again to reveal Abnur Tharn. Despite the fact he has just scrubbed himself clean with cold water mere moments ago – he hasn't even bothered to take the towel with him, and for Stendarr's mercy, the reddened burn-scar from his waist to mid-thigh looks really terribly and painful – he is as red in face as a boiled mudcrab meat. He might not have brought in a towel, but he's brought a bottle of wine. Judging by the expression, he is not going to share, though. He limps to the edge of the bath and splashes into it with the grace of a nightingale who's just hit window head-first.

Everyone is giving him very pointed looks by that time, although Lyris has the suspicion that the Green Lady is more staring at the collection of scars Tharn has. He looks over them and says with a defeated shrug: "I'm very happy to see the two of them getting along, but even as her father I don't have to be necessarily present in every moment of her life."

He pulls the cork out of the bottle and takes a sip. After a very long consideration he passes the bottle to Lyris and makes a vague gesture indicating that it is meant to go around. The bottle feels almost frozen in Lyris's hand, and she understands Tharn's uncharacteristic generosity the moment the wine touches her tongue – it is sweet enough to glue her mouth shut. She passes it to the Green Lady who hands it to Calo without even having a taste. Oh yeah, the Green Pact.

When Sai Sahan enters, nobody even raises any questions, everyone just nods along and Sai doesn't need to explain that the western bathroom is currently occupied. Lyris, however, scoots over to him and makes herself more comfortable in his arms. The bathroom is getting a little crowded and she clings to familiar faces, that is all, she convinces herself.

For a while there is a comfortable silence which then Tharn manages to break by simply saying: "You know, I have been thinking –" The groaning of Lyris, Sai, and Zamarak's joined suffering fill the room. Tharn continues nevertheless: "How hard would it be to move that granite block from the western bathroom to, say, the central plaza fountain?"

"Tharn, no," is Calo's definitive answer as he returns the bottle of moon-sugar wine to him.

The door opens again. Everybody looks up in mild confusion to see the Silvenar, all soaked and with a book in his hands, making his way to them. He sits down at the edge of the bath, feet in water. The Green Lady makes her head comfortable between his knees without any hesitation. Silvenar pets her hair and announces to the rest of the company: "I usually don't mind as long as it is quiet enough to read my book. I have figured this place would be quieter."

Zamarak leaves the bath for a moment to open the window to let some breathable air in. The one inside of the room has all been used. Twice. The temperature in the room drops somewhat and everyone makes an attempt to sink into the hot water as deep as it is possible.

Lyris finds herself being lulled to sleep by the warmth and quiet chatter, and also by the fact she is using Sai's chest as a pillow and he is running fingers through her hair. She is totally in love with him, and just as soon as she gets through this overcrowded bath and through the dinner and through that Mantis apocalypse and through Tharn's sneering, she is going to do something about it.

Again the door swings open. Everyone turns their head to stare at Queen Khamira in kresh bathrobe.

Lyris breaks the ice first: “Alright, what's *your* excuse?”

Khamira's tail swishes from side to side. “This one imprudently told Cadwell that her bathroom has bubbles. This one also thinks that she is not brave enough to break Cadwell's privacy.” It is easily recognized who is and is not familiar with Cadwell, because except the Silvenar and the Green Lady everyone pales, in spite of the water being very hot. Well, Zamarak doesn't pale, but his fur stands to attention.

“So, who wants to see a naked Queen?” Khamira doesn't wait for volunteers, slips the bathrobe off and jumps into the water. “Seriously, how hard would it even be to move that block from the western bathroom to – Khamira doesn't know where – the fountain on the main plaza?”

Tharn sadly notes that his wine has just ran dry. “I don't know. But I am sure it would be great for tourism.”

## Chapter End Notes

I had the bathroom scene prepared for such a long time and I was looking forward to writing it: the absurdity of more and more people coming until they are stuffed in there as sardines in a can. There are two more alternate versions of the end: After Khamira, Varen joins them, as Clivia kicked him out to "have some me-time," or Cadwell joins in, because he was feeling lonely. In the end, I have discarded both of those, but they were a very much a real possibility.

The sunken baths are really big, aren't they?

# Dine Fine Wine

## Chapter Summary

The Tharns explain their shenanigans, and Prefect Calo is not paid enough for this whole escapade.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Zamarak introduces the dinner as a light evening meal. Lyris will have one day to sit him down and explain to him what light meal actually means, because this is not it. For a long time there is awkward silence into which only silverware clinks.

Lyris is grateful that Elsweyr Khajiits are not the Imperials and she doesn't have to navigate more than one fork and one spoon. There are also several knives on the table, but she notices nobody is using them on their plate, only when they need to cut off a portion of whatever is served on the table. Even both Tharns, who are the model of all manners or so Clivia says, nibble the large chunks of roasted vegetables, fruits, and meats off the fork.

She is trying not to seem too gargantuan. She is largest at the table by far and feeding her requires a lot, but it wouldn't look good if she cleaned the table by herself. And she'd be pretty much capable of that, given that all the sugar wouldn't rot her teeth first.

In the end, Lyris settles for the soup, roasted duck in honey and oranges, and pickled anchovy to fix her taste, because those are salty and slightly sour. She is sitting between Sai and the Green Lady, so she is mimicking their manners at the table and tries only what they are eating. It has to be said that for the Bosmer diplomats there are several dishes served specially without the use of any spices or vegetables, so they can eat it without bad conscience.

"I don't know," says the Green Lady once she picks the tiny fish bones from between her teeth. (She has beautiful teeth.) "If it is as you say, Your Majesty, and the moon sugar cane is truly the gift of the moons, then it should be alright. But I don't want to risk it. It smells delicious, however."

"We've run into this problem yesterday," Sai hums, "is honey allowed? Have you checked, Silvenar?"

"I have," the elf nods. "Honey produced by bees is basically animal product, so like milk or cheese it does not violate the Green Pact. But if you are a strict traditionalist, you'll avoid it all the same." He then makes his stance on strict and blind traditionalism clear by drinking a goblet of honeyed milk. "And while the Green Pact commands us not to let any meat go to waste and eat our fallen enemies, I have seen what the Mantis bodily fluids can do to mer's body. And as the Mantis are clearly not of our world, I think we have a very solid ground to rule them out as an exemption, much like the Daedras."

Tharn breaks into a cough. Clivia spares her father a look and says: "We are *eating*. Nobody wants to hear about your second wedding, Father."

"I was not offering to tell that story," Tharn opposes her. "And thank you for reminding me, I've

just lost my appetite.”

Lyris idly wonders what happened during the aforementioned wedding. She knows that Tharn's first wife was a member of the Dark Brotherhood, and that the fifth marriage brought a diplomatic havoc to Morrowind, but the second wedding hasn't been mentioned yet.

Cadwell isn't eating at all until the desserts are brought to the table. For once he's left his helmet somewhere else, and his hair has gone all poof-like after the bubble-bath he has taken. So even when his face is full of cream, he looks like his head is surrounded by silver halo.

“I can be picky,” he explains, “since I don't need to eat at all. Also don't eat the Daedras, the meat is horribly stringy. It takes hours to turn it into something edible, and all you end up is a stew anyway.” He seems to be ignorant of the fact that everyone has paled at the thought, and continues with his usual cheer and enthusiasm: “Besides, you can't find garlic or carrot anywhere in Coldharbour, at least at reasonable price. I have tried to growing my own, mind you, but the results were horrible. The poor wailing spirits which used to roam have all found new homes now, but I really feel terribly sorry about that. But ah, I was made for heroic deeds, not for gardening.”

The soul shriven proceeds to tap his mouth, beard and nose with a napkin to smear the cream evenly across his eyes. “Although, I am quite sure what wrong steps I took. I blame mainly the fertilizer, really. It certainly made things to grow, I cannot say that it was not working, however, there can be too much of the good stuff. Anyway,” he flashes a bright smile across the table and only then he notices – but appears not to mind it or connect it to his person – everyone staring into their plates and glasses with empty eyes and terrified expressions, “Abnur, I am all eager to hear what you have been up to. Everyone here was quite certain you have left us for good. I am certain that you have a story of quite the amazing adventure up your sleeve, and I cannot wait to hear everything.”

Tharn looks around the assembled company, and when he notices that more than half of the people are nodding their heads in silent agreement that, yes, he owes them an explanation or two, he sighs. To stall for time, he finishes his glass of watered-down wine and mixes himself another. Finally he rests his elbows on the table and clasps his hands together with a wry smile: “I am afraid, Cadwell, that in that case I am going to disappoint you terribly. I do believe that everyone here is familiar with what happened in Senchal, but correct me if I am wrong.” Nobody corrects him. Sai wouldn't shut up about it, although Lyris has only heard his updated anger full of anger directed towards Tharn's irresponsibility, while everyone else present have been told also the version full of mourning and grief. Stands to reason that Tharn hasn't heard any of them, especially since Sai barely spoke to him a word ever since the unexpected reunion in Riverhold. But then, Sai never spoke much in Tharn's presence.

“Very well then. When I delved in to contain the explosion, I was well aware that I would not be able to diminish it in its entirety. Containing any sort of power is damming a river – if the water – respectively the power you are attempting to harness – is too much, it will break through and cause a disaster even worse than the one you were trying to prevent. I had to be careful not bite off a bigger piece than I could swallow, so to say.”

“That has always been a problem for you,” Zamarak murmurs quietly enough that it would be impolite to comment on it, but loud enough that everyone hears. Khamira allows herself to chuckle quietly at that remark, and pats him in the back of his hand.

“What I am trying to put into words is that while everyone else would be safe, as loose as the word allows for it, there was going to be enough fire to do serious damage to any being caught in its epicentre, such as I was. Nahfahlaar lent me enough power to shape the dragonfire so I would be

able to deal with it, but it did not extend the limits of what I could bear, both within myself and on my body. Not to mention that when the explosion actually went off, some shrapnel managed to hit me in my side. Rather painful that was, I do not recommend it to anyone. At the very last moment I did the only sensible thing and teleported away. I managed to land in a very poor shape on Lyris's hunting grounds in the Rift. The rest of the story is her patiently nursing me back to health in spite of us both knowing better than that.” He empties his glass again to punctuate he has finished his over-dramatic storytelling.

“Let me get this straight: You took as much dragonfire within you as you could, an amount which by far exceeds what any mage among men, mer, and beastfolk known to me was ever able to contain,” Varen crumbles a piece of bread onto his plate as if it helped him to keep his focus on the words, “and then, terribly exhausted and at the verge of death you managed to open a portal targeted on Lyris, whom I had great troubles to find through all manners of magic known to me. Is that what you are insinuating?”

Tharn sighs: “No. Well, yes, except the bit about the portal. I admit I opened it blindly without any target destination in mind. Which is one of the grave mistakes one can do when opening a portal, but I think that considered how many other grave mistakes I committed in the process, this one barely even counts. I mean, I went through a portal heavily wounded, without complete control of my power, didn't use enough stabilizing wards in the process of opening it in the first place, and last of all, as embarrassing as it is, I passed out when I entered the Oblivion between places.”

Varen drops his bread upon hearing that. The Silvenar, Clivia, and Zamarak all stare at Tharn as if he had grown a second head. Lyris clears her throat: “I get the implication that it was a super dumb and reckless thing for you to do, but because I don't understand magic besides the classic ka-booms, translate this one for me.”

“That I landed where I landed was a pure coincidence,” Tharn explains, “but the mere fact that I managed to land at all, in one piece and alive, and as far as I can judge with my soul and mind intact, is a miracle. I for one would not be surprised to find an outside intervention, Divine or Daedric, in this regard, but then I highly doubt any of them would be paying enough attention to me to save my life in this manner.” His smile is very bitter, as he finds nothing really cheerful about the matter. To change the topic, he says: “I still haven't learned what is my daughter doing here. If you would indulge me, Clivia?”

Clivia Tharn stops her assault on the salmon foam, of which she's already devouring a third serving, and gives Tharn a long considering look across the whole table. “Oh, fine. But only briefly, because I tire of repeating the same story over and over. Quite shortly after Mannimarco took you to his beautiful castle Whatever-The-Name as his rightful spouse-“

There are mixed sounds of chuckles, palms hitting forehead, and one very quiet: “I've raised a monster.”

“-I found myself represented by my very own Dremora look-alike. I didn't wait for Mannimarco's first attempt to get rid of me for real, and took a very long trip around the worlds. I could probably publish the memoirs of those three years as a bestselling children storybook, so let me just say that if you manage to find an inn with decent beer in the Apocrypha or the Everglow, I'm paying you your weight in gold I personally mine.”

She pours herself a glass of water and shakes her head to whisk away a pile of unpleasant memories from the time. She continues in a bit quite voice: “I was able to return only a year ago, and found Cyrodiil in shambles and ruins, so to say. The Council is a basket of burning tomatoes and impossible to work with. My status as the Empress-Regent had been revoked – thank you very

much my Daedric double – and none of the three Alliances are willing to listen to a voice of reason. Their are too busy with their political chess and playing soldiers to notice that not only Cyrodiil but their lands as well cannot bear this for much longer. But no, they just want to keep arguing and killing people for a highly uncomfortable chair which isn't even made out of actual rubies.”

Varen nods shortly: “Yes, it is just very worn red velvet.”

“Oh, I had it changed,” Clivia adds absent-mindedly and twirls one of the carving knives in her hand. “Anyway, I managed to contact the Silvenar, as the least unreasonable part of the three Alliances.”

The least unreasonable man in question raises his cup in a mockery of a toast. Whatever it is in his honeyed milk, he is fairly inebriated. “We share a common goal, Tharn. For the sake of Valenwood, the War of Three Banners must come to an end, the sooner the better. Yesterday was late. If you helping me helps you and all of Tamriel as well, then I consider it a nice bonus.”

“There you've heard him. Any questions to that? Oh, Titanborn?”

Lyris puts her hand back down on Sai's thigh, and speaks her mind: “When travelling through a portal, which takes a shortcut from one place to another through Oblivion –“

“That is completely different topic than I was talking about.”

“Do *not* interrupt me, she-Tharn,” Lyris snaps. Clivia recoils several inches back, despite the fact that the two of them are sitting at the far opposite ends of the table.

Tharn, on the other hand, nods and helps Lyris to pick up where she's left off: “When travelling through a portal, then what?”

“Does it enable you to travel through time as well?”

Zamarak's whiskers twitch: “Time travel is not possible without the blessing of Alkosh, or Akatosh as you would call him. This one is filled with winds of doubt as to why you are asking, Lyris-do.”

“Mainly I want to know,” says Lyris while making a mental note to find out what the suffix -do means when she has a moment of free time, because she is not letting Zamarak to make fun of her in her face, “whether our bigmouth Eats-Dragonfire-For-Breakfast went straight from the explosion to my doorstep, or if he was floating in the Oblivion for two years.”

“Never mind what you've just called me, Titanborn,” Tharn puts his glass down rather abruptly, “but *what*?”

Like talking to a three year old, Stendarr give her strength. “The whole dragon ordeal, that was two years ago,” Lyris sighs heavily, “and I had you in my house for not even a full month. I might be an uneducated Nord barbarian, but even I see that this doesn't add up. So which one was it: Did you skip those two years, or were you just, you know,” she wiggles her fingers in the air, “floating around unconsciously in the Oblivion with a hole as big as your ego in your hip?”

Tharn is aware that everyone is looking at him both expectantly and horrified by the revelation. It seems that he himself hasn't realized until now that he has missed two years of his life. Lyris gives it to him that when he woke up, she did not ask him what was the last year he remembered. She didn't ask him anything, in fact, besides if he is able to feed himself now.

The man crosses his arms and sinks into the backrest of his chair. “I admit that I haven't got the

faintest. I hate both options equally.”

Cadwell merrily pours him another wine, but forgets to add the water. Maybe he is doing it on purpose, hoping that all the sugar glues Tharn's mouth shut. “I see you two have had the most exciting time. Nothing against you, Khamira, my dear, but it definitely beats the mundane everyday bother of being your Claw. All I have to do is finding old decrepit ruins for you, and preventing locals to play me like a puzzle.”

“You mean like a fiddle,” Sai frowns slightly.

“No,” Cadwell beams at him, “I know what I am saying. There were these four fellows who have decided to repeat that ugly Orsimer's attempt to sew together all the pieces of my body and bring me back, so I had to dispatch them. I believe I have taken care for good now, though, because last time I burned the body to ashes, so good luck with *that*.” The stab he gives the chocolate soufflé is a bit more vigorous than necessary.

Prefect Calo, who has been silent so thoroughly that he slipped everyone's mind, adds drily: “Yes, you did. The southern end of the Ashen Scar is still smouldering, in spite of both my men's effort and the fact you've visited it four months ago.” He rises to his feet and bows twice – once to the end of the table, once to the front where Queen Khamira is sitting. “You Majesty, ladies, gentlemen, if you'd excuse me, I will now retire to my chambers. The War Council gathers early tomorrow morning, and I would like to spend an hour of not having to think about anything related to the Daedra whatsoever before I attend the meeting. I believe I will see you all there, and as for today, I wish you a good night. And... Silvenar?”

“Yes?” The elf looks up in Calo's direction.

“Earlier today you've acknowledged that it is hard to keep focus on reading when in the vicinity of a loud disturbance. I would like to remind you that the wall our rooms share is *terribly* thin.”

“I make no promises, Prefect.”

“Let me rephrase that,” Calo smiles without any happiness or joy, “if you two disturb me in my reading tonight, I will barge in your room and defenestrate you. Gag yourself if you have to, I do not particularly care. Again, good night.” He turns on his heel and leaves the dining room.

Khamira rolls her eyes: “This one only now sees the mistake of her ways. She should've run a brothel. Tharn, not a word about Rimmen's tourism.”

“Would not dream of it.”

## Chapter End Notes

I am very fond of Prefect Calo. And despite my better judgement, I am very much enjoying writing Clivia, even though I was certain I'd hate it.



# Interlude: On the Distinction between Duty and Obligation (by Prefect C.)

## Chapter Summary

Prefect Calo wakes up early and decides it's coffee time. The world denies him to drink coffee in peace.

## Chapter Notes

I believe that you have noticed it, but I want to point it out for you: When I change the point of view to some other character (our main POV is Lyris), I try to change the way that character communicates to the reader (that's you. Yes, specifically you!). The most notable change is, of course, in the usage of names in the not-spoken parts. But for example, have you noticed that Sai Sahan when listing the members of the Company, he is giving them in alphabetized order? Or that he uses quite flowery metaphors?

Yea yea, it's not important. I just... like to dig into the characters. Talk to me about characters. I want to talk to people about the characters.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There is one Imperial saying which claims that a good soldier rises before his enemy. There are more than a few possible interpretations of it, however it's been always intended by military officers to be abused as a reason to drag their men out of their beds in the least reasonable of hours.

There is another Imperial saying, strangely straightforward if considered it gets thrown around by politicians most of all people. It says: Everyone is your enemy.

As a Prefect, Calo is both politician – although if the politics are a game of Strife, he is a 3-point stone, rather than a player at the desk, and in Calo's opinion this is something to be thankful for – and a soldier. From his own experience he knows that no place in Tamriel holds enough coffee to follow the advice of both sayings.

But Akatosh knows he is trying, making a point of getting up each day before the sun rises. True, now that is winter it puts him on a more lax schedule, but he is grateful for every hour of rest he can get.

He slips out of his room quietly as a thief. Already dressed, but not wearing his armour. Queen Khamira acknowledges that the Irregulars have brought their own belongings with them, but she had decided shortly after her coronation that they need a set of civilian clothing as well. Calo still finds it uncomfortable to have cleavage going all the way to the middle of his chest, but it was the Queen's decision and he does not speak his mind against her on such frivolities.

There are many options of what to do. The training grounds would be empty at this time and he could spend the time there undisturbed by anyone. But he would then need a bath, making him arrive to the War Council either soaking or sweaty, and neither seems like a favourable opinion to

him. There is always the option to retreat to the library for the three hours, but as enjoyable thought as it is, he'd have his head swimming with distant worlds and places afterwards and could not focus on the more pressing tasks at hand.

In the end Calo makes his way down to the kitchen, bids a good morning to the couple of members of the staff who are already awake, and asks if he could get some coffee. Apparently he can get some coffee, a whole kettle of it, and then it is off with him. Finding his room too much of a suffocating place, he decides to settle with his drink on one of the balconies.

Against all his expectations he finds the Grand Chancellor there, leaning on the balustrade and looking into the distance across the city. Either he did not notice Calo entering or he refused to acknowledge him. If you pressed a knife to his kidney, Calo would say it is the latter, but he cannot rule out the first option as well. Yesterday the man did not seem to be fully himself.

And he saw the Grand Chancellor naked. Not an important thought, but one that he finds most problematic to shoo away. The man about whom he thought three years ago that he'd never see him outside of the portraits in the books of Imperial history. He saw him naked. By all accounts it was telling that the Grand Chancellor should never get into the way of anything sharp ever again, Kynareth help it to be so.

Yes, well, at this point Calo saw a lot of high ranking people naked, but Queen Khamira has fur all over her, and as for Empress Regent Clivia and Emperor Varen, well... Truth be told, Calo feels disconnection between them and their status. Especially since Varen quite explicitly told him that if he refers to him as to the Emperor one more time and he, Varen Aquilarios hears it – “And as a blind man, Prefect Calo, my hearing is delicate enough to hear your heartbeat across the room.” – Calo's future will be a very short one.

He decidedly stops his caravan of thoughts and puts the pot of coffee down on the low table. “Good morning, sir.”

Tharn sighs: “Calo, are you saluting?”

He manages to stop his hand somewhere around his ear, and instead of the salute, which he wasn't even aware he was about to do until the Grand Chancellor asked him, he scratches the back of his head. “No, sir.”

What to do now? Should he stay, perhaps engage in a conversation? Should he bantam gear out of here? He decides to sit down and drink his coffee as he originally intended to.

The Grand Chancellor turns around to him. Maybe it's the combination of the reflected torch light of the guards below and the light of the two moons in the sky, but his eyes seem to be burning with fire and the skin around them as well. It makes the dark bags under his eyes stand out.

Calo offers him coffee, as he has just found a forgotten cup which had fallen behind the table. It has a wine stain at the bottom, but since he is going to use it himself, it doesn't matter.

Tharn takes it with a flickering smile. “Thank you.”

“You are up very early.”

A sip of coffee. “I have yet to see my bed. The dinner still lays very heavy in my stomach, so to say.”

Calo very slowly nods. He doesn't pretend to be understanding the situation the Grand Chancellor has found himself in. He realizes one thing, though, and he addresses it out loud: “It has to be

exhausting, not to have a break.”

The man sits on a chair opposite to him and asks: “What do you mean?”

“The last two years were, well... peaceful. More or less, anyway. But if you pardon the expression, Grand Chancellor, you've been going from the whole dragon shit to this, whatever *this* is.” Calo gulps down his cup of coffee and pours himself another, while the Grand Chancellor's hard look is burning straight through his cheek. The Prefect has been stared at disapprovingly by a lot of people, and he recognizes a professional death glare when one is aimed at him. He pretends, however, that he is not aware of it.

“Prefect Calo, you call me Grand Chancellor one more time within my earshot —“

“Yes, yes, you'll personally remove my collarbones and stuff them into my eye sockets. I'll make a note to call you the Grand Chancellor with the same breath I call Varen the Emperor. I am certain there will be a betting pool on which one of you two will get to me first.” Calo's smile is wide and humourless.

Tharn's face is dark for a very long time before it breaks into an ugly laugh. “I am not around for two years, and already Varen is stealing the best of my quotes. I shouldn't feel flattered by it, yet here we are.” Then he sips the coffee again and adds: “Besides, if I was considered dead, it means I have lost the status as the Chancellor, so it is really inaccurate to refer to me as such. I have a plethora of vices, but stealing titles that are not my own is not among them.”

“But screwing up your sleep schedule is?”

“Apparently, Calo, the answer seems to be yes. But you are not in the position to judge, it is barely four in the morning.”

“I have my ways to keep me through the day.” As a demonstration, Calo rises his cup in a gentle parody of a toast.

Tharn gets the hint and their cups clink together. “Share your secret: Where did you get regular coffee, without any cream or moon-sugar?”

Calo grins with a little spark of pride: “Oh, I just ask for *po'zza-toj rawl*.”

“Sorry bean water?”

“As long as I get what I want, I do not really care what it is called.”

Then they drink in a silence which seems comfortable enough to Calo that he doesn't try to break it. Only once the pot is empty and both the men feel somewhat more awake, Tharn Definitely Not Grand Chancellor asks: “Remind me, have we met before? Before Elsweyr, I mean.”

Calo doesn't have to think about it, he shakes his head even before the man finishes his question. “No. If we have seen each other in the Empire, it had to be in passing and I was not paying attention in the moment. I believe that I would remember meeting someone like you.”

Tharn slowly nods. “I like to think that I would remember meeting a man like you are as well, Lord Prefect.” He stretches his back, a motion accompanied with a lot of crackling. Intuitively, Calo follows the suit.

“You two breaking someone's bones?” asks a sleepy woman voice from the doorway. “Can I join?”

“Good morning, Titanborn.” Calo stands up to salute to her, although in a slipshod way of one soldier meeting another off their respective duties and not knowing what to do with hands.

The large Nord woman cracks her knuckles in response with multiple pops, each of which makes Calo's hair stand in terror. She growls something about damned moods and that apparently this is what this week is going to be. Calo doesn't understand what it is supposed to mean in the slightest, but Tharn seems to be good at translating her, as he says: “My congratulations on still not being pregnant. Prefect Calo, I suggest we embark on a quest to the kitchen and get more of the sorry bean water. Everyone's life is in great danger if we do not retrieve it.”

“Shut up, Tharn,” Lyris is murdering him with her eyes. “I'm menstruating, not going on a killing spree.”

“The latter often follows the first in your case. At least, such is my experience. And you need some coffee.”

She seems to resign to that. “Yeah. I need some blasted coffee. To the kitchen, boys.” And that is how Calo finds himself sitting on the floor in the Great Hall of the Rimmens Palace, side by side with *the* Lyris Titanborn and *the* Abnur Tharn, all of them sharing a pot of bitter coffee and only two cups.

“Early mornings are surreal and religious experience,” he mumbles. At the same time he is feeling sleepy and jittery.

Tharn nods. “That is Azura for you in a nutshell. Dusk and dawn. Rather poetic, is it not?”

“What's going on in there?” Titanborn turns to the entrance door from where there are growing louder voices of an argument heating up very quickly.

Calo doesn't have the time to react before both Tharn and Titanborn stand up as if on an unspoken cue, and proceed to insert themselves into the problem. “Oh by the Eight,” he mutters and with the pot he scoops up from the floor to his arms he runs after them, because somebody has to do the cleaning up after heroic interferences.

“This one cannot and will not let you in!” The guardsman, or rather guardswoman, is pointing her flame staff at a quartet of figures standing in front of the door, all also visibly armed but weapons not drawn. Yet.

A Bosmer with a braid of dark hair gone wild with twigs and leaves who would be more decently clothed if she was completely naked, a bow, quiver of arrows at her hips, skinning knife strapped to her thigh. A Khajiit of light fur and red hair styled into a short crest, black leather, one sword visible and without a doubt a great number of knives which Calo cannot see. An Altmer of gold skin who grew bored of sleeveless shirts and came up with shirtless sleeves, shield and mace, towering above everyone else present, including Titanborn. Another Khajiit, stained robe of an alchemist, out of breath, leaning heavily on his staff.

Titanborn puts a gentle hand on the guards' shoulders, and looks at the intruders: “Speak quickly if the matter is pressing. Hold your silence if it is not. You stand in front of Lyris the Titanborn, and Abnur Tharn, the Grand Chancellor of Cyrodiil, Overlord of Nibenay.”

“Right,” the tall elf scoffs, “the Emperor of Cyrodiil, pleasure to meet you.”

“Are you?” Tharn makes a step forward from the doorway into the moonlight. Once he is properly seen, both the elves take an amazed step back. The silver Khajiit doesn't seem to understand why

exactly he should be impressed by anything, while the red-haired one is deliberately suppressing his surprise, well enough at that that Calo would have missed it were he not waiting for a reaction of that kind.

In spite of that, Tharn continues to look at the Altmer, jabbing his pointed question into him: “Then tell me, the reign of horror of which Daedric Prince are you to unleash upon Tamriel?”

Calo finds himself unable to hold himself any longer – his palm meets with his forehead with such a force that he is going to have a terrible headache for the following ten minutes. The skin of his hand pricks and tingles.

“This one would say Namiira,” finally speaks the Khajiit in black leather. “He might not be the emperor of anything, but letting Namiira take over Tamriel would be an easy work right now. This one would not have to move a finger.”

He and Tharn exchange looks. Then the battlemage smiles *almost* kindly: “You must be Razum-dar. I've heard of you.”

“All lies, this one can assure you.”

“What, even the one with the goats in Do'Krin Monastery?” Tharn seems amused.

Newly introduced Razum-dar shuffles his feet. “Eh, that one might be true. That is besides the point of this one's mission, though. We came to see the Queen of Anequina.”

“I'm fairly afraid she's asleep,” Calo sighs. “Don't you find it a bit unreasonable to barge in to see the queen at – What time is it now even – five in the morning?”

The other Khajiit looks over his shoulder to the south. “No,” he concludes finally. His voice is deep, as an avalanche of rocks. “This ones do not- This one doesn't find it unreasonable at all.”

Calo considers all options and reaches the decision that he hasn't got enough coffee in himself to deal with this morning. To carry on he finishes the rest of the pot rather quickly. “Very well then,” he says. “I am not going to go and wake Queen Khamira for you, but you can just as well wait in the Hall of Thousand Shields, since we've finally excavated it from underneath all the discarded paperwork.” Under his breath he adds voicelessly a number of cusses directed at late Euraxia Tharn.

The Hall of Thousand Shields is not the most impressive and there are still papers laying around it still. “I am afraid that the previous sovereign decided to use this meeting room as a place to store everything she didn't like to see, yet it couldn't work manually. Paper, mostly. Old reports, petitions, letters of complaint and pleas, and suchlike,” Calo introduces it.

He continues in a detached voice of a guide: “The reliefs depict the legend of Khunzar-ri if you read it counter-clockwise and- Excuse me,” he stops rather abruptly when he notices movement at the far end of the room.

With the resolute steps of a hardened soldier he makes his way across the carpet until he reaches the shadowed corner where he recognizes a familiar figure. “Good morning, Cadwell.”

“Calo, my friend!” The soul shriven's armour clinks as he skips out of the shadows with arms open wide. Calo allows himself to be hugged for a brief period of time. When it lasts long enough to be weird, he writhes himself free.

“Yes, hi. You've scared the hell out of me, are you aware of that? Do I want to know what you were doing here?”

Cadwell pretends he hasn't heard the question, which Calo translates that it either wasn't important or that he really doesn't want to know, possibly even both. “Ah, you've brought new faces in here. Terribly sorry, fellows, I don't think that I recognize your faces. Except Zur. Hi Zur!”

The Altmer's eyes dart from Cadwell to Zur and from Zur to Cadwell several times before he asks: “You know this kitchenware fellow?”

Zur slowly nods. “Yes, this one knows him, although not well, and almost did not recognize him, as he is not covered with Daedra blood all over. This is Sir Cadwell of Codswallop. Sir Cadwell, these are my companions, Magister Atheleiem,” at that the High Elf nods as bowing to anyone seems to be below him, “Sheni,” the Bosmer stops admiring the ceiling reliefs, and gives Cadwell a fleeting smile, “and Razum-dar.”

“Wonderful chaps, all of you. Happy to meet you all. Oh, where are my manners! Don't you all stand here like you've grown your soles into the floor, sit down, sit down! Zur, you must have told me how you've been, I missed you terribly. I wanted to visit you at the Guild,” Cadwell keeps on rambling as the four morning arrivals find chairs to sit it without even considering any other option, “but I've found myself terribly busy, really, didn't know where my head was until this nasty necromancer, Phoom he called himself, found it. Ah, but that is old news. How have you been since, well, since we've climbed the Endless Stairs. My, that has been some time. I really am bad at keeping in touch with people,” Cadwell frowns and the rest of the words he just half-audibly mutters.

Calo, as inconspicuously as possible, taps both Titanborn and Tharn's elbow and steers them out before anyone can notice they have gone. As they are passing through the door, they can hear Sheni asking Cadwell if that is him depicted in the far right corner, and Cadwell muttering that yeah, probably, before he begins telling the high tales of his heroic deeds during the end of the Planemeld to Atheleiem and Razum-dar, who seem completely hypnotized by him.

“What was that?” Titanborn asks and gasps in amazement once they have escaped.

“Cadwell doing what he does best,” Tharn shrugs. “That is, giving everyone a terrible headache.” He rubs his temples and leans on a nearby marlstone pillar.

“Can't disagree, but usually he does it with hammers and rather large swords,” Calo breathes out.

“Oh, you can't mean that,” Titanborn's voice softens, “Cadwell wouldn't harm a fly.”

The two Imperials exchange looks. Tharn looks away first. He claps his hands together: “Alright, Titanborn, a bit of a necessary context regarding everyone's favourite soul shriven. Three years ago I accidentally freed a rage of dragons.”

Calo stops listening at that, and fishes around his pockets for the book of short fictions he's been trying to read in the spare time he's got in the past days. If Tharn wants to do the speaking to Titanborn, let him do it. After all, he knows her well enough as what to tell her and when.

And because the Sewerchat Solstice Exchange is due on 20th December and I am not even halfway through writing that, I am going to put this aside for the upcoming few days and finish the super secret solstice project I was assigned.  
(In case you happen to be fans of Les Mis as well, you can read it too, once it comes out. In the meantime enjoy the New Life Festival.)

# Surgically Precise Battleaxe

## Chapter Summary

The War council, despite all experiences with all manners of councils, manages to reach some conclusion within the first three hours. Oh, and Sheni has a thing for big women.

## Chapter Notes

I am trying to write this story in a manner that no matter your play-through of ESO, you can fit your character as the Vestige of this particular reality. The only exception to this is Zur. I am sorry to those who didn't choose Zur. The universe next door has this exact same story, where instead of Zur is Gadris.  
(I am still quite sad that I couldn't save both.)

Additionally, the Sewerchar Solstice Exchange has been a success, and I am back on updating this. Abeit a bit slower than before, because Christmas, family time, exam term... you know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

War councils of any sort are always a bother. A bunch of people saying something should be done, that somebody should act. When they finally agree what should be done, they can't seem to agree who should do it, except they are sure it is a task for somebody else. Lyris doesn't exactly understand why she has to be present. Aside from the fact that this kind of talk is irritating her, she is not a strategist. Lyris sees, Lyris does. Or even better, War council finally reaches a decision, War council tells Lyris what to do, Lyris does.

Sai, on the other hand, is a strategist, and so is Prefect Calo. Those two have been arguing over the map of Elsweyr for the past twenty minutes while the other people present in the room are at various levels of interest in listening. For example Lyris is studying the reliefs on the ceiling.

So far she's gotten two things from all of this: The ghost cats or moon-haters she heard a bit about yesterday are some daedricized version of the Khajiit known as Dro-m'Athra, but strangely enough these don't seem to be having anything to do with the Daedric Prince of decay, Namira. Also, Khunzar-ri was quite the badass and ladies' man. And gentlemen's man. The ceiling reliefs are portraying him as the beast of all manners of parties.

“Spare us the talk, Calo,” Clivia breaks an exceptionally lengthy monologue, “there simply is no expandable manpower to protect either any more land we are able to reclaim, should the Mantis and its leadership decide to nest their swarm-mothers there again.”

Lyris perks her ears and stops staring at the ceiling. When other people begin to talk, things are finally about to move. Good, good. Thank you, Clivia, you might be a Tharn, but at least you are useful.



“Besides the fact that there is nothing like expandable manpower in any setting,” Varen speaks, his unseeing eyes staring unsettlingly at the centre of the table, “obviously we have been taking a wrong approach. We are trying to manipulate a siege hammer when we are not strong enough to lift it.”

Tharn speaks: “I believe I've understood the situation as it has been talked about. I agree with Varen. Instead of brute force, the powers should be dispersed into smaller groups moving with focus and surgical precision.” He has probably been putting this sentence together the whole time, because until now he was absolutely quiet, which was a bit creepy.

“What exactly are you having in mind?”

“He wants me to go somewhere and slaughter things, Sai” Lyris shrugs and pours herself a cup of water. When she looks up, Tharn is looking at her with an unbelieving smile. “Whenever you use the words *surgical precision*, it means you're going to tell me or Sai to go somewhere and cause horrible bloodshed. Don't think I haven't picked that up by now. I'm on board with that. Violent slaughter, I mean.”

There is poorly hidden chuckling from the other side of the table. Razum-dar wipes his nose and adds: “Just so we are clear, this one thinks it is an agreeable option. Abnur Tharn is speaking of small groups of highly skilled individuals, is that correct?”

“Yes. My idea is not all that different from the regular surviving strategy in day-to-day Cyrodiil politics.”

“Dismantle the opposition's leadership,” mumbles Clivia, “never turn your back to your bodyguards.”

Varen adds without missing a beat: “Drink your morning antidote.”

Tharn's lips move in an inaudible prayer before he speaks his mind: “What I was thinking was dismantling the opposition's leadership.”

Calo slowly nods as the gears of his mind spur into motion. “We know where the vital pillars of their leadership are. Or at least we have a couple of locations which are the most likely to home some of them. We still do not know who is the head of this operation, however, and that is why we don't know how to fight them.”

“There are going to be the ghost cats,” Sai ruffles his beard in thought, “and those like to talk when they feel powerful.”

“It would be one group to the Doomstone Keep, one to the Sunspire, and one to the Tangle.” Zamarak produces a box of tiny metal figures and puts them at the corresponding places on the map.

“Tangle has been taken over?” Razum-dar's eyes widen in both horror and surprise.

“Afraid so,” Khamira sighs. “Not the way the kingdom wanted to deal with the bandits, but let us try to think at least a little positively.”

“What... What of the farms in the Merryvale?”

Tharn looks at the too-calm Khajiit and says: “The farms were overrun, I am afraid, but the locals evacuated in time under Zamarak's order. They are safe for the time being.”

Clivia clears her throat rather loudly: “The groups. Small. Four people, I dare to say, is enough for a covert operation. Swift enough, already a force to be reckoned with.”

“I suggest,” Tharn adds, “that each group should have at least one member from Razum-dar's company for the sake of completion of their report. Each group should have someone capable of magic, but I suppose that goes without saying.”

“I am going,” says the Green Lady. “I have been stuck in this civilization long enough. And Silvenar is going with me, because like hell I am going without him.”

“See?” Lyris grins. “I told you, Sai. Surgical precision is a codeword for *kill many Daedras*.”

“Another apocalypse averted and you might even speak Tharn fluently,” Sai chuckles.

“I'm sure I have a couple of cousins I don't like to marry you off to,” Clivia adds sourly. A very violent debate, with everyone talking over each other, follows. Only a few people abstain from it, and Cadwell doesn't count, because he pulls out his lute for an impromptu recital which is not helping things.

There are several attempts to end the wrought havoc. First Razum-dar coughs discreetly. Then Zamarak coughs less discreetly. Then Zur starts crying, but that was because the Green Lady has just told him that he would never know what a soul-mate is.

Finally Abnur Tharn borrows Calo's intelligence folder and slams it flat on the desk. The impact makes all bottles, glasses, rummers, cups, mugs, chalices, goblets, jugs, flagons, beakers carafes, pitchers, pots, and kettles jump solid two digit numbers. Fortunately except for one milk placed at the edge of the table, nothing is spilled. Everyone present also jumps in their chair, because the slam is loud enough to make Lyris remember that one time a giant slapped her one around the ear. The present Khajiits pat themselves over to make their fur lay back down.

“In case I am not interrupting anything,” Tharn's voice is sweet and smooth as honey laced with enough beetle scuttle to wipe out entire Rimmens, “we could return to the matter at hand.”

There is hurried nodding and downcast looks. Lyris cannot shake the feeling that her father has just walked in and personally disapproved of everything she did in the past five minutes and also her entire life, and judging by the face of everyone else, they feel very much the same. One thing has to be given to Tharn: he has been the patriarch of a pride of backstabbing self-entitled egoists for over a century, functionally making him able to impersonate the worst of every father of anyone born on Nirn, and perhaps beyond Nirn as well.

He continues: “I would entrust Sai Sahan with the first group,” he flicks his hand towards Sai, “And Titanborn with the second.” At that he points in Lyris's direction and she finds everyone looking at her. She gives her widest grin and the curious eyes quickly turn somewhere else.

“I myself would –”

“You yourself will remain here,” Khamira shakes her head. “As far as this one is aware, out of everyone present you know the most about the Daedra and at the same time you are able to share that knowledge in a manner other people understand in the instant.”

“Oh, we are still upset about that whole cake thing, aren't we?”

“Yes, Cadwell,” Khamira frowns, “we all are still absolutely furious about that cake thing.”

“It's not that bad,” Calo shrugs. “I mean, my eyebrows have already grown all back, and I've never

been fond of fungi on my plate anyway. No permanent damage done. Pardon my manners, Your Majesty. Please, continue.”

The Queen's claws stop impatiently tapping on the table as her purring voice fills the room again: “As said, Tharn should remain here to aid Varen with the coordination of all the groups on their respective missions. Should any of you run into anything daedric we haven't encountered here yet, which is more than likely, it will definitely be faster to check up with him than with the library. And time is of the essence. As for Varen, he is a skilled scryer and has proven his ability to coordinate many different groups in field from distance. As such, he has my full trust. And so does everyone around this table.”

Sheni's head tilts to side. “Even us?”

In response, Khamira only covers her right eye for a moment, and then she turns the metaphorical page of the conversation: “The groups. We need to discuss the composition.”

“We still do not know who is going to lead the third group,” Razum-dar points out. Then he adds with a sigh: “You three, stop looking at Raz.”

“Well, that is settled, then,” Varen rubs his hands. He pulls something out of his pocket – it is the size and shape of a coin, but the colour is all wrong – throws it from palm to palm, and when he is sure everyone is looking, it disappears between his hands accompanied with the soft pressure of magic.

Lyris knows these kind of parlour tricks which mages are so fond of, after all Tharn does them all the time just because he *can*. Varen does them because with his lack of sight they are practical. She looks down next to her cup to find a shiny blue coin-like shape with a hole through it. Sai is already running the one he's been given through his fingers, while Razum-dar is frowning at his as though it was going to bite his claws off.

Sai looks from the trinket to Varen and asks: “Seer's eye?”

“I have done alterations to it. While Lyris has proven herself to be most difficult to find through magic means in the past years, this thing should make it easy to reach all of you at a moments notice. Rubbing the surface in two full clock-wise will activate the copy I have, making the contact effective both ways in case there is an emergency. They don't work at too large distances, however, or across various realms,” he adds. “In fact, they've proven to be rather explosive if they are stretched too far. Cadwell's help with testing this had been invaluable.”

Both Tharns ask at the same time: “How far?”

“I admit I don't know how far it is from Riverhold to Stitches in exact numbers, but that is what is a stable and safe distance.”

Lyris looks at the map with new interest. “That means that in order to talk to us without blowing something up, you'll have to move as well, right?”

“Correct. If memory serves me well, the Tenmar Temple, a bastion of moonlight in this time of darkness, is more or less in the centre of the triangle the Tangle, the Sunspire, and the Doomstone Keep represent. Besides that, it is also one of the safest places in Elsweyr at this moment.”

“Hmm... This is all fine. Raz would like Cadwell as a part of his team. He hopes to get to know him better.” If Razum-dar promised the soul shriven chocolate fondue, he couldn't make him any possibly happier.

“Oh, now we are calling dibs on people?” The Green Lady finishes her cup of water and puts it on the table upside-down. “Fine. Silvenar and I want Sai as our company.”

“I believe it is Sai Sahan who is the formal leader of the group,” Calo points out to her.

She only shrugs: “Like I care. He doesn't talk nonsenses.”

“As long as you don't ask him about poetry,” Lyris, Varen and Tharn groan in the same time as Sai says: “As long as you don't ask me about poetry, I don't.”

“I don't know basically anybody. I need someone who can do magic and someone who can do stabbing,” Lyris drawls out. “In return you get one half-giant with battle axe. Volunteers?” To her surprise, Zur's hand shoots up almost immediately. Less surprising is Sheni, she'll have to let her know she is not looking for a girlfriend.

There is a metallic clang from the front end of the table right before Prefect Calo slides off the chair to his knees. After a moment he proclaims: “Tails. I'm sorry, Zamarak, you are going.” Then the table jumps rather abruptly, and when Calo's head resurfaces into their sight again, the Prefect is holding the back of it with one hand with the pained expression of someone who hasn't yet fully accepted that in Elswyer they make tables lower than in Cyrodiil. But he puts the coin back on the table and doesn't speak of his most recent injury.

Zamarak sighs and looks at the gathered company with a hint of panic. “Oh, if this one must. Razum-dar, would you honour Zamarak and let him come with your company?”

“Sure. No problem.”

“You are two Khajiits and Cadwell. You'll need someone to watch out for you,” says Clivia, “not to mention that unless Zamarak's sprouted a second magic tail overnight, you still need someone competent regarding the art of magicka.”

“Which puts me on Sahan and Silvenar's team, I suppose,” says Atheleim. “Even if Silvenar is proficient in magic, he is too valuable to be put in the first line of offence. Unlike me.”

Lyris looks around and moves her chair over to sit with Zur and Sheni. Other people follow her suit, and after a while, three small groups are formed. She cannot help but notice that she is one person short on her team, so she asks: “I take it that neither the Queen or Prefect are going, right? Defense of the rest of Elsweyr and whatsoever. Just because I'm still missing one person.”

Calo looks her over, then he studies the map for a while: “Well, you'll have to count for two, I'm afraid. On the other hand... What would you say about being deployed into the Tangle? We expect the weakest resistance there, since in that part it's the northernmost the Mantis have ever gotten. No sights of swarm-mothers or piercers or any of those larger creations.”

Lyris grins a very ugly grin: “I'll cut there with surgical precision.”

## Chapter End Notes

I've reached the point when I have on-set present more characters than I am able to handle. Splitting them into teams is a way to reduce this without killing anyone.

# Revelling in Destruction

## Chapter Summary

Lyris's team delves into the Tangle.

## Chapter Notes

Ah, this one belongs to the longer chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Tenmar Temple is a bastion of resistance amidst the wilderness overrun by the Mantis and their ghost-cat leadership. “That’s a poetic way of saying it’s been surrounded by the enemy on all sides for two weeks now,” Clivia adds as she and Varen open the portal.

“Only two weeks?” Lyris asks.

“That is how long this situation has lasted so far,” Sai informs her. “It is not a fortress, it is a temple. It was not build to withstand a deadric siege.”

Lyris wants to ask how has the temple been holding up in that case, but she realizes she is going to see that on her own, and thus she follows Sai and the Silvenar into the portal without any other word.

She finds herself in an overgrown courtyard, stone and ivy as far as eye can see. And trees. Big trees, not like the graht oaks of Valenwood, but it is getting there. Actually, she can see small graht saplings making their way through the cracked tiles.

Rimmen is arid and dusy, hot during the day, freezing in the night. The short storm Lyris was greeted with in Riverhold was an icy sleet and did not feel like water at all. Tenmar is different: hot and humid, crawling under the skin, making the weather strangely personal. Despite being dressed rather lightly under her armour, she begins to sweat, and her clothes and hair get stuck to her skin.

This is going to be one hell of the day. Not to mention she is already three glasses deep into soothing sweet milk to stop snarling at people, because second days are just the worst. But hardly she could ask the Mantis bastards to put this whole invasion-whatever on hold for a week.

Instead she turns to Zamarak who has, just like her, been passively admiring the view: “How the hell did you get a trebuchet in here? Where did you even get an Imperial trebuchet from?”

“Oh, the trebuchets were a gift from the late Queen Euraxia,” Zamarak smiles lightly. “Well, *Queen*... And Zamarak believes that the Prefect has had this particular trebuchet taken apart, transported here piece by piece, and then his Irregulars put it together again. He is a very resourceful man, this Prefect. This one would believe that in some other life he was a Khajiit.”

“Tharn’s told me, yes.” Lyris doesn’t want to know what it would have been like if Calo was with

Euraxia. His soldiers obeyed him without thoughts and hesitation, despite she's seen him encouraging them to question his orders. He has to be extremely capable in his field of work if he made it to a Prefect with such an attitude.

"Everyone here?" asks Tharn as soon as he appears from the portal. Yes, indeed, he is the last one to come, but he just has to check. It occurs to Lyris that he is actually checking whether or not everyone is present, and not complaining they all are taking too long.

"I'm absent," the Silvenar rises his hand. A few people around chuckle at the remark.

Tharn doesn't even bother turning to him. "Well, we'll have to do without you, then."

"Already our chances have doubled," Lyris adds. The faces it draws from everyone present are horribly amusing. She ought to be a bit mean to them a little more often, just to have these looks in her life. Especially Sai's poorly covered grin is a sight to cherish.

Silvenar adjusts the sheath of his sword, pretending this whole exchange hasn't just happened. The Green Lady pats him on the shoulder and looks around the assembled people. "Alright. Anything before we go? No? Goo-"

"Actually, Raz has to ask something. And don't think him stupid for asking, alright?" The Khajiit takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. "Does anyone in here have a Psijic in their pocket?"

"That is an oddly specific question," Varen frowns. Then his face brightens: "Oh, yes. Summerset. While there certainly are similarities, I am certain this is completely unconnected. But in case you run into a member of the Psijic Order... Don't stand in their way."

"And don't flirt with them. Just to be on the safe side"

"I think," Clivia speaks slowly and coldly, "we want to be on our respective ways before my father decides to share this anecdote. My team, Sunspire, now."

"That is Raz's team," Razum-dar grumbles. Then he adds: "Oh, not another portal, it makes Raz's tail prickle all over." But he is apparently not keen on walking all the way by foot, so he heroically walks into the tear of light, followed by Zamarak and Clivia. Cadwell is too busy instructing Varen about how to care for Honour in his absence to notice the portal, but he gets around on his own without a problem, so no big deal there. Although it is probably Clivia has tried to leave him behind on a purpose. *Tried* being the imperative verb here.

Another portal is provided for Sai's group by Atheleim. "I really do hope we arrive where we intend to arrive," the elf prays quietly. "Making portals to a place you've never been to before is tricky."

"In the worst case we die," Sai shrugs it off. "We are already prepared for that."

Lyris waves them a goodbye and then looks around the temple for one last time. "Are you two sure you won't be bored here?"

Varen's light green shirt creases as he shrugs with one cheerful bantam guar sitting in his arms. (It's good to see him in actual clothes and not the threadbare rags he had worn when she found him in Coldharbour and refused to throw away for the entire time of the Planemeld.) "Tharn is a politician and so used to be I. If we feel boredom crawling up our backs, we'll find a way to entertain ourselves with ease."

"Have you got a list of things to argue about, or are we going to make it as we go?"

“Shut up, Tharn.”

Sheni tugs at Zur's sleeve and drags him to Lyris where she hooks herself onto her arm. The height difference between them is ridiculous to such an extent that the elf's arm cops are painfully digging into Lyris's hip.

“Usually it is a pleasant walk from here to the Tangle,” Varen says, “or so I have been told. But today we are in hurry and also the jungle is crawling with Mantis. So allow me to-” He is interrupted by a low melodic hum and a blue glow from his shirt. He reaches under it to uncover the hollow communication stone.

A projection of Razum-dar, slightly violet and only slightly more solid than air, appears. “Oh, it works. Should we be worried that this Cadwell knight is popping all around the place, leaving this glittery dust behind?”

“No,” Zur shakes his head. “That is completely normal cadwellage.”

The Khajiit doesn't seem to hear him, his eyes set on Varen instead. “This thing is working, right?” he asks after a couple of more seconds of silence. “This one hopes it transmits sound.”

“Oh, apparently you cannot hear anyone who is not touching the amulet. Hm,” Varen's brow furrows. “A flaw in design I'll have to overcome. Your companion Zur says it is a normal occurrence. Also, if he appears with an unreasonable amount of weapons, you should take them as a gift and not question it.”

“Or if he makes explosives. Or if he recalls a very obscure historical fact,” Tharn adds, and Varen promptly refers it to Razum-dar.

“This one is having second thoughts about this,” he sighs in response. “Thank you. Hopefully Raz won't have to contact you again.” The projection disappears.

“Now, you three,” Varen turns back to Lyris. “We have wasted enough time already.” He holds his palms open and yet another portal appears.

Zur goes in first, Sheni second, Lyris is going last to make sure she hasn't forgotten anyone behind. Just as she is stepping into the light, she can make out Tharn's words, already distorted: “Good luck, Titanborn.”

Tangle turns out to be a system of caverns and caves connected by tunnels, either man-made (or cat-made in this particular case, probably) or natural. From somewhere within Lyris can hear water.

“I have no idea where to start except everywhere at once,” Lyris says. “Zur, you said this place was a jungle? It doesn't look much like jungle.”

Sheni kicks into the soft ground and sniffs it. “It was a jungle two weeks ago. Then it got burned down. This all is ash, mostly grass and leaves. Chips of wood. They seem to be bitten. Something here was eating wood.”

“Zur likes fire. In moderation.” The Khajiit looks around and sighs. “It used to be a beautiful place here. If we drive the Mantis away, new seeds will grow from the nutritious ashes. I intend to add some more fertilizer.”

“Oh, should we, like, turn the other way around?”

“He means he wants to set those creepy bugs on fire, Sheni.”

The Bosmer gasps in realization. Then she points further into the caves. “There I smell blood. As in regular blood, not that ugly bug stuff.”

Lyris hefts her axe. “We’ll see who is bleeding over there. If luck has it, we can help them. Either with bandaging or with bleeding more quickly, that depends.”

They have to cleave their way through, but with Zur’s love for throwing flasks of every effective concoction, Sheni’s desire to show off how many arrows she can shoot at once, and Lyris’s need to brutally slaughter, they don’t consider the Mantis in the way to be a problem.

“Good bug, dead bug,” Zur muses as he plucks the thousand-first eye of another of the corpses and stuffs it into a box for alchemical reagents. “It is disgusting, Zur admits, but their eyes contain something explosively acidic, and when refined, it is a good weapon. Or claw-care paste when treated a bit differently.”

They reach water-covered floor and things get a bit more complicated. For a starter, there is a Drom’Athra standing there in the middle of the shallow pond. The water is reaching up to Lyris’s ankles, it’s full of blood, and most infuriatingly of all, it is freezing cold. Otherwise it would be refreshing, but the fact that already rotting Khajiit bodies are thrown around, partially submerged, makes her nauseous.

The Daedra sees them just as they see her, and she does not hesitate to move in an offensive move. The bloodied water moves at the whisk of her wrist, and lashes out to set Lyris, who is standing in the front, off balance. She rolls with the impact, however, so she ends up wet but not disoriented and on her back. No, she is kneeling, axe in front of her and ready to strike.

That is just as well, because the corpses begin to move. Their movements aren’t the shambling steps of zombies, these are twitchy and poorly coordinated, as if moving puppets. Lyris’s traitorous thoughts flutter to the memories of playing Manor of Monsters. Hopefully if she punches those corpses deader-than-dead, some star-struck emeralds will drop out of them. Considered that they are closing in, it is the right time to put this theory to test.

When the decayed skin meets the business end of the axe, it rips open in a shower of gross mucus, black goo, and larvae. Lyris has to wipe her face off to at least see something. Only to see claws a few centimeters from her nose. They stop when the reanimated corpse falls backward with a clutch of arrows in its face.

Lyris turns to see Sheni giving her a big thumb up. The thumb glistens in a flash of lighting, and Lyris realizes that it’s actually a knife. The Bosmer throws it at the ghost cat just in time to make her fumble a storm-filled spell. The misdirected and only half prepared bolt of lighting and angry blackness hits the ceiling.

The cave shakes.

“Cover!” Lyris shouts before the first specks of stone fall to the ground. She is not much versed in stone-science but knows that Elsweyr stands on marlstone and standstone, and that it is soft and doesn’t need much persuasion to stop holding it together. Shouting loudly enough in an underground well can easily cause cave-ins if Sai is to be trusted on that. Random blast of magic is bound to do much worse, of that is Lyris sure.



She grabs Sheni by the arm and pushes her deep into the tunnels. Then she has to quickly jump back, because the ceiling comes down and Sheni disappears behind a newly made wall of stone rubble.

If Lyris had the time to be concerned, she would be, but the dro-m'Athra doesn't give her the luxury. In fact, she gives her a blood-bolt to the back. The induced paralysis has her defenceless. Luckily she falls on the rubble piled up high enough to keep head above the water. Otherwise she would drown. Now she is only in danger of suffocating, because to keep breathing is a great toll – her muscles refuse to move, and she has to really focus to keep her lungs working.

At least the zombies are now leaving her alone. It is probably that they react to movement, and perhaps sound. Lyris isn't making any of that, isn't even able to. Zur on the other hand, well, he has been rather busy. The air is heavy with ash and smoke.

But there is only a limited amount of flasks the Khajiit can throw around, and his combat prowess is far from being something desirable. He throws a few fireballs before he is overwhelmed and forced underwater.

Surprisingly, the Daedra claps her hands and the zombies let go off Zur's head, although not off his limbs. But at least he can have his snout above the water and breathe, even if in the moment he is coughing up water.

“What are you that you dare to disturb Adjija in her work?” The Daedra's cold voice resonates in the air, in the water, in the stone, in every fibre of Lyris's body. It's painful. It's terrible. It's... amazing.

“Speak!”

The command is impossible not to follow, Lyris feels her own lips weakly moving around her own name. Zur, who is not paralysed, has to answer: “This one's name is Zur.”

“Well, Zur, bright flames burn in your future,” Adjija bares her fangs in a smile. “Within your soul I see void. You can do great work for Terisse. And with my help, you will. Rise, don't mind the hatchers.”

Zur rises, knees trembling. This soaked he looks only half his size. Adjija, tall in her monstrosity, grabs him by chin and leans in very close. Her voice is almost fond as she purrs into his face: “You only need to embrace the void. Revel in your own destruction.”

From where Adjija is touching him, Zur's fur is turning deep blue and then black. Darker still, as if it was swallowing all light. The Daedra lets go off him, but Zur is too struck by the change to move. Black sparks run across his white fur, staining it wherever they touch, the corruption spreading and embracing him like a cloak. The darkness fills the cave, only Adjija's markings glow a cold and dangerous blue

And then there is golden light, warm as sun, as life, coming from within Zur's chest

“What?” Adjija steps back and has to shield her eyes from the light. “No! What is-” She hasn't got the chance to finish her question, because the light and the dark crash in an explosion.

For a long time there is darkness, dust and the sound of falling stone. Lyris can't move for a long another while, so a few smaller stones fall on her and she can't even shake them off, which is horribly annoying.

It is entirely possible that for some time she fell asleep or passed out, Lyris doesn't know. Keeping

track of time is difficult. Eventually she can move again, not with ease but she doesn't have to fight her body for every movement. She curses under her breath and does the only responsible thing.

Varen's projection appears and illuminates her current surroundings in dim violet. "Ah, Lyris. Pleasure to see you. You don't look well."

"Yeah, hey." She rubs her temples to relieve some of the tension. She remembers to unclench her jaw, which helps a bit. "Wait. You can see me?"

"This projection is not dependent on sight. I perceive you with the eye of my mind."

"Alright." It doesn't make sense, but if she told Varen that, he'd ramble about technical details she *still* wouldn't understand and it would be very time consuming. "Some troubles, got separated from others. Sheni is probably fine. Zur probably not. I need to know anything about Terisse, and how long does blood-bolt induced paralysis last."

Varen turns his head to the right as if listening to someone standing behind him. He frowns and nods. "Neither Abnur Tharn nor I know who or what is possibly Therisse. As for the second question, it can be anywhere from five minutes to a full day." He pauses and then adds. "I don't like your way of thinking, Tharn, she wouldn't- Very well. On *you* specifically, Lyris, the estimated guess is about fifteen minutes. That is considered the caster is capable enough to make such a spell get past you. As a person of mixed blood, you are resistant to all manners of blood litanies."

"Alright. I'll try to proceed or get out of here. And find the rest. Whatever happens first."

"Be careful, Lyris. Now, Tharn, what the hell is a blood lit-" The translucent Varen fades before he can finish his question.

The cave is cut off. The tunnel back is cut off. So there is only one other tunnel which Lyris can go through. She takes a moment to change her water-soaked pad, already there is a blood stain in the crotch of her trousers. Divines dammit, her laundry is going to be one hell of a work when she gets home. The thought is so infuriation that Lyris manages to forget that moving still hurts like horker shit.

Blindly in the dark she finds her axe in the disgusting water, and using it as a walking support she makes her way forward. If Stendarr has as much mercy as the priests say he has, the tunnel leads back outside. Knowing her own luck, however, it is going to lead to... To Oblivion, probably. Or even worse, a library.

Apparently not even the Mantis can exist in absolute darkness, as along the tunnels Lyris can see braziers with fire. Granted, the fire is sickly blue-green, but it is warm and casts enough light for Lyris not to stub a toe and dry her enough so she can stop shivering.

Along the way she runs into several Mantis – she doesn't count those – and three dro-m'Athra, but none are anything close to Adjija's calibre. That is something to be thankful for. She only hopes anybody would show her the way out, but nobody is kind enough to help her. There aren't any helpful signs telling her where she is or where she is going.

As there aren't any crossroads, she can't get lost, but also cannot change her course. Varen would certainly say something cryptic and ominous, probably about rivers, or possibly about lights and tunnels. She wishes he was here to say that. Or Tharn to have some quirky remark she could punch him in the face for.

There isn't any Tharn to punch, so she just decks the nearest Khajiit zombie in the face. The skull splinters and Lyris finds her fist covered in rotting brain and more of the ugly black larvae. Eugh. She shakes the writhing creatures off, although one larva has already bitten deeply into her skin and tries to burrow within her forearm. She pulls it out and squishes it under her boot.

Hatchers, Adjija called the undead monstrosities. Hatchers full of larvae. Is that how the Mantis reproduce? Lyris is close to throwing up, but only pinches her nose as not to breathe the foul air, and continues forward.

Eventually she reaches a rather large cavern room with a bit of natural light falling in through a cracks in the ceiling high above. Besides that there are more braziers illuminating the place well and casting shaky distorted shadows all around. There are scattered stone blocks full of papers, parchments, and knives, while the walls are lined with carved-in shelves full of books. There are three notable exists.

In the middle of the room, in the spotlight of the natural light is laying another dro-m'Athra in a pool of white liquid. Given that the motionless body is pinned to the floor with a spear, it is safe to assume the liquid is blood.

There is somebody else, hard to spot because of the lack of movement – a Dremora-like person with rather large curved horns, standing in front of one of the libraries, focused on a book. His side is stained with the white blood, and he doesn't seem to pay Lyris any notice.

She crouches and sneaks along the wall and behind the tables to the exit opposite her, careful not to make a sound or to draw any attention. But then from that way enters an Altmer, radiant and opulently dressed, and Lyris has to stop, because were she to move, he'd notice her.

The man taps his staff on the ground. "Oh, how typical!" His voice is familiar to Lyris, but she cannot place it, because there are metallic undertones distorting it. "You sit for a light reading and let me do the hard work."

"I am supposed to see to you," the not-Dremora says, voice deep and rumbling like a shaken sack of gravel. "I am not here to do your work for you. Unless, of course, the Triumvirate deems you unworthy of their trust and the task you have been given. Which is to say... that you are to fail or to betray your master. You would not dream of that, Mannimarco, would you?"

Lyris bites into her knuckles not to scream. *Mannimarco*. But... he does not look like that backstabbing corpse-herder. The face is less sharp, his eyes less sunken. He seems softer in a way, more ordered. Now that the Daedra has called him by name, however, Lyris curses herself that she hasn't recognized him outright.

Divines help her, she needs to get out of here.

Mannimarco frowns and walks past the table behind which is Lyris hiding. "No such a thought has crossed my mind. And if it did, I would not share it with an Iddaroht such as you."

Lyris makes a slow advance to the next table, conveniently placed. When she sinks there to her knees and puts her hands on the ground to stay balanced and not fall over, which would be rather noisy, her fingers brush against paper.

She can read, despite Tharn's popular jabs and remarks on that topic, and can read Daedric letters, if she is given enough time to make sense out of them. She doesn't have that time now, but recognizes immediately that by the red letters at the bottom of the page, these documents and drawings are rather important. The thin stack is quickly grasped and rolled up, and then stuffed

behind Lyris's chest plate, hopefully it will be out of the harm's way. A barrel of bear lard for an armour with pockets!

That is when she notices the Seer's Eye glowing. The horror of the upcoming consequences washes over her. Blood rushes into her ears, successfully drowning out the conversation between Mannimarco and the Iddaroth, whatever that is.

Varen's projection appears, dimly violet and transparent as its usual. "Lyris--"

She shakes her head violently, puts a finger in front of her mouth and waves her hand, trying to signal Varen to get down, all the while she is fishing for the Seere's Eye and taking it off.

"What is this?!" Mannimarco shouts.

Lyris groans: "Oh. *Shit*." There isn't time to tell Varen this is not a good time, she has to ready herself for combat. The Eye falls to the ground.

"Zykkm-ahtro, you let an intruder in here!"

The Daedra finally puts down his book and slowly turns to the elf and to Lyris. Meanwhile Varen's projection fades out of existence. "Your instructions given to me regarded only the army of Therisse," he says, voice calm and light. "Since this mortal is not bearing her mark and she is not interrupting our work, I paid her no mind."

"You- you! I see it now!" Mannimarco flashes a bolt of white-gold light towards Zykkm-ahtro, who deflects it with a spell-shield without much care. "You conspired with the mortal! Your betrayal is far beyond my schemes! But not for long you will meddle with my plans, for I--"

What Mannimarco has intentions to do Lyris never learns. The spear pinning down the dead body of the ghost cat in the middle of the room rises up, and then strikes the Altmer from behind. It comes at such an angle that while it entered the body through his neck, it comes out of the abdomen.

The Daedra lowers his hand, and the body collapses to the floor. "He has been extremely annoying as of lately," he says to Lyris as a way of explanation. "He can explain why he has attacked one of the Emissaries of the Triumvirate to Molag Bal himself. And besides, a little disincorporation builds character."

Lyris lowers her axe by a few centimetres. "Why did you help me?"

"Help you?" His eyes glisten with amusement. "I helped myself. To be rid of him for a time will be a great relief, even if it means dealing with all of this alone. That it helped you was not intentional."

For a while they just stand there, looking at each other. Then Zykkm-ahtro asks her: "Don't you have somewhere else to be? Something else to do, perhaps? Weren't you running away?"

"Well, since you have to know, I was sent in here to kill the local leadership," Lyris snaps at him right back. This passive-aggressive manipulation is not working on her, she's seen better from Tharn.

"Then it seems we came in here with a common goal. That is interesting. But if it is so, I am afraid your mission is over. I have sent Maha'jil back to Oblivion shortly before you have arrived," he kicks the dead daedrized Khajiit, "and Adjija's presence has faded from here half an hour ago. Therisse will not be pleased about it, but there is not much he can do directly."

Lyris thinks for a moment. “If I leave now, will you or anyone affiliated with you follow me?”

“No. For the time being, anyway. I cannot speak for what happens tomorrow. But leave now. I have a book to read and you are disturbing me. Get lost from my sight before I remove you myself.”

That's as good as it could get, so Lyris takes her leave. On the way, she grabs another handful of papers and pulls two random books out of the shelves in hope it is going to be something useful.

The exit leads her to a narrow ledge from which she can climb down if she is careful. She has to kick a few more hatchers along the way, but they seem to be far less coordinated now than before. Once her feet touch the soft ground made of ashes, she remembers she has left the amulet with which she could contact Varen in the library room. Oh, she'll have to do without. It's been worse. In fact, this is not that bad situation, she remembers this particular cave – it's the entrance cave!

She heads towards the exit, her head so clouded with relief she doesn't pay attention to her surroundings. Which is exactly why something jumps on her once she stands in the sunlight.

“Big girl!”

“Sheni, please, don't yell,” says Zur, sitting on the side of the road, adjusting bandages on his foot.

“Horker's bloated mother,” Lyris breathes out. “You two are alright.”

“These ones thought we have lost you,” Zur smiles weakly. “Never been happier to be proven wrong.”

Sheni lets go off Lyris. She has lost a considerable amount of hair, but not her cheerful attitude. “Let's head back, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Lyris agrees. She helps Zur to stand up and slowly they make their way downhill through the scorched jungle.

“If I could do anything about it, I'd forbid burning trees,” Sheni says when they pass a tree trunk hollowed out by recent fire.

Lyris smiles. “If I was the Emperor,” she says, “I'd forbid burning trees and wear a silly hat.” Zur and Sheni both give her strange looks. She'll have to explain the rules of If I Was The Emperor to them. But it's going to be a nice long walk back to Two Moons at Tenmar, so it's not like she hasn't got the time.

## Chapter End Notes

[I wanted you to meet Zykkm-ahthro.](#)

Also, I don't kill off characters for added tragic value. Sheni is fine. Zur is *exceptionally* fine. More on that after the weather news.

## Interlude: Legends and Heroes of Tamriel (by C. Tharn)

### Chapter Summary

A brief update on what Razum-dar's team was up to in the Sunspire.

### Chapter Notes

Here the exam term has started. Thusly I procrastinate by writing.

Added side note: With this chapter, the story has surpassed The Night In Gale, my longest fic on AO3 so far, in length. TNIG, however, has not yet been bested in popularity, though.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Not sure what I expected, but this certainly wasn't it,” Cadwell pants for breath.

“It says Sunspire, right above the entrance,” Clivia sighs and stops on the stairs, “which means it is a spire to reach the sun. Of course, it cannot reach the actual sun, that would be rather foolish.”

Cadwell sits down. If the Divines are merciful, he won't get his behind stuck to all the blood and hemolymph covering the ground. “Yes, but this certainly is a lot of stairs for what is supposedly a place of worship. Couldn't they build in an elevator or something? How comes you aren't even flushed Clivia?”

She would never admit it is because of a thick layer of makeup. “Practice. I basically grew up in the White-Gold Tower. Compared to it, this is nothing.”

Zamarak turns to the two of them: “We should hurry up. Razum-dar is ahead of us and does not seem to be keen on waiting. This one would not like him to face whatever it is on the top of the Sunspire alone.”

Cadwell groans, but gets his ass up and moving again. “Why are we even taking the long way? I mean, sure, I am not that agile cat man to scale the wall all the way to the top, but you know.”

Clivia refuses to know or even acknowledge. Cadwell has been grinding on her nerves ever since she had met him. Everyone seems to hold the insane soul shriven in high regards for various reasons, but Clivia hasn't been able to uncover any of them. Aside from procuring the most obscure and useless historical or cultural trivia regarding the Elsweyr in the most inconvenient of moments, he has done nothing useful so far. And yet, in spite of that of that Aquilarios treated him as a friend and Father has talked praise about his most unusual qualities. Granted, he failed to mention what those qualities of Cadwell's actually are...

Cadwell is a dangerous man – he attracts danger like a lamppost attracts moths and a cadaver attracts fleshflies. But that's it.

Zamarak is far more useful, even if he is as annoying as Cadwell. His tendency to hover around is unsettling Clivia greatly, his inability to elaborate on even the simplest of statements vexes her all the time, and as for the atrocities he is wearing, well, Clivia envies Aquilarios his blindness at times.

At least the famed Eye of the Queen, Razum-dar, has proven himself an enjoyable company. Unsurprisingly he immediately placed himself at the centre of attention and events, letting the all of Nirn to revolve around him, but Clivia has grown up with her sisters, brothers, and cousins, all of them Tharns: this is nothing she wouldn't be used to or even able to handle. But that bastard just skipped off on the wall and to the top, and now the rest of them have to catch up with him.

Clivia entertains such thoughts only because they fill her with anger which makes her ignore the pain in her thighs and calves – it is a *damn* a lot of stairs – and makes her go forward and to the top of the Sunspire.

She gets there ahead of Zamarak and Cadwell, and finds Razum-dar slightly overwhelmed. Of course he wouldn't say he doesn't have the situation under control, but obviously he is glad Clivia is there to help him dispatch the Mantis in radical manner. Somewhere in the process she slides across the floor like a bard giving a solo performance, and thus saves Zamarak's furry hide and also skins her knee and destroys her hair, because the numerous eldritch insects she guts on her way spill their innards all over her head. No guts, no gory.

Once the top of the spire is cleared of the insect, she notes: “No workers or drones, have you noticed? Only the slashers, and I believe I have noticed a vessel. Certainly it signifies *something*. I only wish I knew for sure what it is.”

Razum-dar tilts his head to side. “What do you mean? Are these creatures organized like termites? You certainly make it sound so.”

Clivia rolls her eyes, because she doesn't want to get into this explanation. But there probably isn't a way out of it, since all eyes are now on her. “I don't suppose you know the game Manor of Monsters, it's older than the two of you together, and Cadwell is out of touch with Nirn.”

“Oh, but I do know it,” Cadwell smiles at her brightly. “Well, heard of it, anyway. Back in the Harbourage Abnur had once complained about missing it and I made the mistake of asking him what it was. The rules were so complicated that ten minutes I just dozed off!” When he notices her expression, he makes a step back and add: “Anyway, carry on. Manor of Monsters, termites.”

She sighs and waves him off. “The Manor has this enemies called Eii, also semi-sentient insect, much like these Mantis as it has been agreed to call them.” She hasn't agreed on that, she would much prefer to call them Eii as well, if for no other reason than one can tell the plural form apart from the singular. One Eius, two (or more) Eii. “And depending on their powers they are classified into Workers, Drones, Slashers, Vessels – those are bastards and you don't want to run into them when you are low on torch or sanity – Swarms, and I think the sixth one were Predators.”

Zamarak looks along the battered chitinous remains and asks: “So you call different mantis after the Eii? This one admits he has not noticed differences between these ugly beasts.”

How is she supposed to explain that to that stupid Khajiit? He hasn't spent the last week and half observing these ugly things. “At least you have noticed that some of them are capable of casting simple spells, right?” Zamarak admits that he has noticed, although only rarely he has seen them. “Well, the ones capable of working with magicka, those I call vessels. Workers and drones mostly attend to the swarm-mothers and the piles of corpses. But here are only the slashers which are the most ferocious in fight. I think the conclusion here is clear.”

At least to Razum-dar it is clear: “No swarm-mother to attend to. Either this place serves to hold an army, or to protect something. Or someone. Hmm... hmm... hmm.” He rubs his chin in thoughts. “But if this was an army base, there would be workers for gathering food, yes?”

“But there is nothing here,” Zamarak protests. “We have climbed the Sunspire, we have seen everything, there is nothing-” A loud screeching noise of tortured marble cuts him off.

They turn around to see Cadwell standing at the edge of a deep dark hole in the middle of the spire. “Would you look at that?” He scratches the back of the kettle he is wearing. “The floor has just disappeared. How rude, I was walking there!”

Razum-dar looks into the gaping depth. Clivia follows the suit and finds more stairs, poorly lit, but thankfully leading down. She would mutiny if she had to walk up one more flight, but walking *down* is fine with her.

“How did you do that?” Razum-dar asks Cadwell from a respectful distance.

“Haven't got the foggiest, I'm afraid.”

“Well, do not look a gifted indrik in the mouth or you'll find your hand bitten off,” he sighs and takes a careful step down. When he is sure the stone is solid, he proceeds further.

Clivia follows him with a conjured magelight to illuminate the way, and doesn't fail to note: “For a Queen's Eye you surely don't question a lot of things.”

“Raz does question. But not always out loud, Tharn, not always out loud.”

She can hear Cadwell's laughable armour clattering behind her as the soul shriven asks Zamarak: “Is Khamira having another special unit that I don't know anything about? Or is Razum talking about a different queen? Seriously, these queens ought to stop giving away their body parts like this. It is greatly confusing.”

That statement is followed by a slapping sound of a soft palm wrapped in bandages hitting a furry forehead.

The met more of the Mantis at the bottom of the newly uncovered space. The acoustics deafen their footsteps, but the insects' shrieking and chirping carries louder than any other sound. Clivia finds that except Cadwell they all have hushed their voices down to a whisper.

“Zamarak he visited this place many times in his youth, but he never knew of this inner sanctum,” the Khajiit says out loud while he is bandaging his newly acquired scratch on his forearm. “But the priests obviously tended to it if the shape and traces of incense speak for anything.”

Clivia limps over to the nearest wall. The skinned knee hurts like a banekin bitch and running around has been cracking the the formed scab over and over and her stocking is stuck to it now for good. Not only that is one good stocking absolutely ruined, but it will later hurt even worse to get it off. Damn. Damn it all!

In an attempt to distract herself she admires the paintings. The stone here is black, basalt if she is not wrong and she is never wrong about such things, and the paintings are also done in black, which makes it hard to recognize what they are supposed to represent. Not to mention the light from above is quickly disappearing. Clivia rises her head to notice that the small circular patch of sky high up above the room is being eclipsed.



“The entrance is closing,” she tells to the rest of the party. Since she is supporting them with her magelight, they do not suffer from any lack of visibility, especially Zamarak and Razum-dar don't, as they are able to see in the light of a dying torchbug as well as they can see in daylight. Lucky cat bastards.

Cadwell enthusiastically nods: “Well, it wouldn't make much sense to leave a tomb wide open for long, would it? Easy access for all the grave-robbers and necromancers and what you have, can't have that. Besides how else would you see the beautiful stained glass?” He points at the now closed entrance.

Clivia's eyes follow. At first she sees only blackness, but then she notices it: The stone above them is inlaid with nearly-black glass and probably a thin layers of obsidian. It does not allow for much light to enter, but once the eye adjusts, the view is quite breath-taking. “Strangely morbid for the Khajiit.”

“Zamarak does not like this place. It has an uncanny aura about it.”

“Hush,” Clivia does her best to calm the Khajiit. Her fingers trace the paintings on the wall. Much to her surprise she find out the depicted shadowy figures are in fact plastic reliefs. Even more surprising is the painful shock the wall gives to her fingers. Quickly she pulls her hand away and inspects it for injuries, but besides the couple of scratches that have already been there there is nothing.

Razum-dar makes his way over to the wall. “Interesting. You lit them up.”

“They *bit* me,” Clivia hisses, but looks at the wall again nevertheless.

It is true. The shadowy paintings are lighting up cold bright blue one by one, and fading away rather quickly again. The impression is that of a black-and-blue Alfiq-raht, a Cathay, a Dafiq, an Ohme-raht, and a Senche dancing and running across the walls.

“Is that just me, or do they seem familiar?” Cadwell sucks on his thumb which presumably means he is deeply thinking, as Sai has told Clivia the other day. Clivia has her doubts that there is left anything in Cadwell's head to thinking. In fact, she is quite certain that that bantam-guar, Glory or whatever the name, is the brain of the team.

“What do you mean?” Clivia asks him.

“Well, they do look familiar, don't they?” Oh Divines, this is going to take forever.

Zamarak shuffles over to the soul shriven: “This one does not recognize them. But tell Zamara, if you saw them before, where did you meet them?”

“Here, of course, where else?” Cadwell pokes the ground with his poker. “Well, not right here, mind you. In that chamber over there.” His brows furrows and then he adds: “The Architect's Hall, that's the name, I think. Zamarak, tell me, it's sealed, isn't it?”

“There are several hidden doors in here,” Razum-dar fills in. “Raz has found three, and still counting.”

Clivia cannot admit she is impressed, but she hasn't noticed any door. However, she performs a basic scrying for warding magic. The familiar tingle of Daedric magic is what she gets in response. “Five, at the very least, all with some sort of magic protecting them,” she adds after she is certain of the results of the scrying, which is almost immediately. “You could call it seals with nose pinched and both eyes closed.” Three questioning looks turn her way. “I've dispelled my way

through the Quagmire,” she shrugs nonchalantly, “so some flimsy door which stubbornly remain closed is as much an obstacle in my way as, say, summer breeze.”

“I couldn't help but notice that you didn't answer my question, though.”

“It is sealed. For now.” Clivia walks towards the far end of the hall, nearly slipping in pools of hemolymph. The blue light of the awakened Alfiq-raht follows her, and when she reaches the place where the door is, the glowing painting is sitting there, as though it is a guard of that door. Maybe she is imagining it, but she can hear it growling.

“Alright, but listen to this, this is good, I tell you.” Cadwell's voice is oddly on edge, he speaks quickly, even faster than his usual, and some of the words he is saying he starts even before he finishes the word before it. “What about we don't go there? This place is huge! We could be exploring it for weeks, months maybe if we wanted to be really thorough and check every single crack in the floor. Plenty of these ugly bugs for us to kill. The Silvenar says they aren't edible, but what does he know, I've never seen him cooking.”

“Why don't you want us to go to this Hall of Architects, Cadwell?”

The soul shriven folds his arms. “Hall of Architects is that way,” he points to his left. “The Architect's Hall and the Hall of Architects are two very different things. One is filled with dead architects and one is, umm...” he cuts himself off and takes a step back.

“I would definitely go there,” Clivia.

“But if Cadwell advises us not to-”

“Zamarak, if those blasted dro-m'A-”

“Not out loud!” Zamarak and Razum-dar cry out both at the same time.

“-buggers want to keep us out of there,” Clivia can only poorly hide her frustration, as she hates to be interrupted when she is talking, “then that alone is an invitation for me to barge in there and spoil whatever it is they are doing there.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Cadwell winces and bonks the kettle on his head. “That is not good. This place is supposed to be warded against intruders, not by them!” He pales several shades, so now he is as a piece of chalk dressed in black and kitchen dishes. “Oh no. They must not use the dancing thing.”

Without waiting for them to make at least a little sense of what that all is supposed to mean, Cadwell then sprints towards Clivia who so-so makes it out of his way. The door open before him as if no ward held them close, and much to Clivia's amazement, the ward indeed goes out with a quiet poof and a smell of rotting onions and guar excrement.

Inside the room are a couple of the dro-m'Athra, who until now have been trying to do something with a large, hollow spherical device and a number of statues standing around it. Cadwell's poorly thought thorough – if thought about at all – charge has obviously upset them greatly.

The Daedras raise their hands, either with spells or with weapons. Clivia grins a grin that she knows doesn't suit her, but oh how much she has been looking forward to this. This is not some mindless slashing, this is going to be a proper fight.

With her right fist full of boiling darkness and her left hand full of dagger, she lunges forwards and follows Cadwell into the mayhem. Something flies above her head, later she finds out it's Zamarak and his performance of what he translates as “butterfly cut.”

The battle is short and brutal, but not as brutal as it could be. The dro-m'Athras are still paying most of their attention to the strange device. The last four standing even manage to set it into motion when the spheres in the spheres begin to turn and spin. A silver light glows from within, but the Daedras are quick to corrupt it into the blackness and eerie cold blue of the cruel void.

In that moment, everything but the spinning and whirring intricate machine goes still – the four companions in dreadful anticipation, the four Daedras focusing their energy into the device.

Then Zamarak proves himself to be least struck by the surprise, grabs the nearest ghost-cat by the head and with a satisfying crack breaks its spine. It goes limp in his hands and falls to the ground like a badly folded sheet of silk.

The rest of the quickly follow the suit; Clivia and Razum-dar opt for slashing the throat of the Daedra they are the closest to, Cadwell throws his poker across the room with a terrifying accuracy and strength and skewers the remaining manifestation of void and corruption right through its shrunken heart.

“What has just happened?” Clivia demands to know.

“They wanted to activate the Dance of Legends. If I recall correctly, it is a sacred device not completely unlike the Moongates, but instead of drawing a bridge between the Jode's Core and Tamriel, it calls the power of the moon here.” Cadwell looks at the growing patch of blackness flurrying in the air within the centre of the complicated mechanism. He looks sad, if he is capable of such an emotion anyway. There is a glint in his eye which could be either a tear or a reflection of one of the Clivia's magelights. “I can't stay here. I can't. But I also cannot stand to see him to become one of them.”

Then he does... something very complicated. In the physical realm he simply extends his hand through an opened gap which has briefly opened between the filigree spheres, and reaches into the black light-devouring hole.

As someone able to sense the flow of power and magicka, however, Clivia feels something she cannot describe. It is a surge of power she has associated with Cadwell's constant folly teleports, but this is stronger, more focused. If the teleports feel like a pancake thrown into face, this is more reminiscent of a needle – precisely and purposefully released power.

From within the blackness again become silvery white as it was before. Cadwell smiles, but only lightly, lips barely even moving, and he takes a step back. “I think that I've been neglecting my duties in Coldharbour shamefully as of lately, so it's time for the great knight to bugger off into the wild wonder-yonder again.” Even to him the silliness doesn't sound right. “I'm sure nobody wants me to be around when he comes to, me least of all. Say goodbye from me to everybody, you hear?”

“Wait, Cadwell, what- And he's gone.” Razum-dar clicks his tongue, and then with new fascination looks around the room. “Look at that. If this one understands these writings on the walls, these dancing spheres represent Jone and Jode. When set in motion, they call forward... Hmm... the souls given to the moons. But that doesn't- Hold on, Raz needs to take this.”

Clivia and Zamarak patiently wait as Razum-dar fishes under his jerkin for the Seer's Eye which has been glowing for some time now. When his hand touches it, Varen's projection appears, and Clivia must consciously stop herself from reaching out to him and wrapping arms possessively around his waist. She has to take enough comfort in hearing some words of cryptic wisdom.

“Razum-dar, are you alright? Our soul shriven friend has just appeared here and took Honour away. He said he is bound for the Coldharbour and is not coming back. What happened?”

Razum-dar scratches the back of his head. “There is this thing he called the Dance of Legends. Raz doesn't understand it much, but it is supposed to draw souls from the moons here. The ghost cats activated it before we dispatched them and now.”

“By Alkosh's claw,” speaks a deep voice of honey and amazement, “who are all of you people?”

Clivia turns around, a knife already in hand. Then she sheathes it and corrects her previous description – not honey, but voice of moon-sugar. She is standing face to face with a silver-white Pahmar-raht of dark hair and wild facial hair. The most notable of his features, however, is the fact that much like Sai Sahan he isn't bothered with a shirt, because his absolutely magnificent abs would shred it to pieces the moment he would move. What, can't the ex-regent of the Empire appreciate a well-muscled chest?

Razum-dar rubs his chin and his eyes flicker between the apparition of Varen and the Khajiit the Dance of Legends has created. Then he states: “Alright, we might have a bit of a problem here.”

“And we have more troubles coming,” Zamarak points to the door.

The silver-white considers the countless Mantis crawling in: “Zar is afraid these demons are too many.”

Clivia forces a smile that would put a fishmonger to shame: “How about a quick portal out of here? All explanations later.” Everyone seems to be more than happy with that plan.

Needles to say that Father is a bit surprised when appear in Tenmar, but maybe that is because she fell to her knees to catch her breath, and then cussed in a very Tharn but unfortunately unlady-like manner, because Divines damn all, the skinned knee still hurts like a rabid skeever in unmentionables.

## Chapter End Notes

In the first draft (which I wrote only in my head, so maybe it doesn't count as a first draft at all, in which case THIS is the first draft) there was supposed to be a quite unimportant running gag of how insufferable braggart and flirt Zar is. But noooo, he has to appear in Dragonhold and be quite a sensible character. I considered to revamp that idea because of that, but realized that any substitute idea would either break the plot or solve stuff too quickly (for example by having Cadwell around).

I think we've had a fair share of hack-n-slash action in this story so far, so from next on some more people interaction, what do you all think?

Oh, by the way, in case I haven't made it obvious: Comments are a great way to make me talk about whatever you want me to talk about. Especially if it's about the fic. I want to talk about the fic. I am very eager to.

# Turning and Returning

## Chapter Summary

Team Tangle returns. People need to talk.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

To the surprise of absolutely no one, their trio is the last to return back to Tenmar. To the confusion of some people, their arrival is announced by Sheni's proclamation: "If I was the Emperor, I'd forbid burning trees, make goat cheese, behead a god, learn Dwemer, marry a spriggan, swim in lava, eat all jaffa cakes, have Secunda in my back garden, declare the Imperiala the new national anthem, make a chicken a Chancellor, speak only in rhymes, made all torchbugs illegal, and wear a very silly hat."

To further confusion, and great amusement to Lyris, Sai, and Varen, Tharn replies with the bridge of his nose pinched: "If I was the Emperor, I'd forbid burning trees, make goat cheese, behead a god, learn Dwemer, marry a spriggan, swim in lava, eat all jaffa cakes, have Secunda in my back garden, declare the Imperiala the new national anthem, make a chicken a Chancellor, speak only in rhymes, make all torchbugs illegal, paint the White-Gold tower red, and wear a very silly hat. I am happy to see you've made it back."

Sai open his mouth, but Varen puts a hand on his shoulder. "Don't," he says softly. "I am certain it is a great addition to the string, but I beg of you, do not. My head could not take it."

Lyris and Sheni lead Zur, who has been very nonverbal ever since they've gotten out of the Tangle, to the pile of the cushions where everyone is sitting. The Khajiit takes a seat and stops holding onto his elbows only just so he can pull his knees to his chest.

Razum-dar looks at him with some concern: "Is he okay?"

"Apparently never been better," Lyris shrugs, "but that's all we've managed to get out of him. He's had that stupid smile the whole time, as if the lass he's been courting for ages bed him in a shrub for the first time. So I take him for his word."

"Any idea why he is two people?" Tharn asks. When everyone looks at him with sudden alarm, he throws one hand in a desperate gesture. "I haven't been punched blind. There are very obviously two people sharing one space there."

Lyris has three thoughts. First: Who the hell dares to punch Tharn? That is her privilege, she's known his annoying ass long enough to actually have a number of reasons to deck him for. Second: That explains why he is still holding his nose, so good punch. Whoever is responsible has just gotten Lyris's sympathies. Third: What in Oblivion does it mean that Zur is two people? Is he in danger?

Traitorous fourth thoughts: Concern for Zur was last on her list of priorities, vengeance for Tharn was the first. She pushes this particular thought as far away as possible, because right now she hasn't got the time to open this jar of scribes.

“This one has got him back,” Zur whispers quietly, but in the sudden amazed silence his voice carries far. “If you wouldn't mind much, we are horribly tired and our head aches terribly. Zur is sure he saw a blanket over there, so we take a little nap, yes?”

Everyone watches with wary eyes as the Khajiit slowly makes his way among the crates of full-moon wine, and wraps himself in Tharn's red cloak as he settles for sleep. Then they hear quiet snoring. Sai is the first to break the moment with a discreet cough: “I suggest we build that bridge when we are in the need of burning something.”

“Fair point. You said something about getting punched. Since I wasn't around, I have a pretty damn good alibi.”

There is an amused snort from between Clivia and Razum-dar. Lyris haven't paid that side of the gathering much attention, mainly because her head is willing to process only one Tharn at a time, but now that she looks there, she sees a rather huge white Khajiit who certainly wasn't part of any group before they left. And he isn't dressed like a monk or priest enough to be one of the Tenmar locals. On the top of that, he is looking very satisfied with himself, teeth bared in a predatory smile.

Zamarak, who is trying not to be there, or at least sink into his teacup, does the explanations: “We have returned from the Sunspire in the company of legendary Khunzar-ri. There was... a discussion about responsibility.”

“That is what it is called now?” The white Khajiit crosses his arms and gives Zamarak a long unreadable look. Or maybe it isn't unreadable, but Lyris can't read it, so same difference. “In Zar's time it called it *a fist*.” A few people around chuckle at that.

Here Lyris has a pause in her thoughts, because she realizes she hasn't seen Cadwell here yet. Considering what Tharn has told her about the knight's past, if this new teammate is indeed Khunzar-ri, she probably isn't going to see the endearing soul shriven around for some time. She'll have to ask someone for details, but not in front of this white-furred mountain of muscles. Probably her source should be Zamarak, because Clivia is insufferable bitch, like all Tharns, and she doesn't trust this Razum-dar, and that is pretty much everyone who was there.

When no one seems to have another snarky comment, with a deep sigh Varen turns to Lyris: “We would still like to know what happened in the Tangle. We have heard of the trials in the Sunspire, Sai's discovery of the Hatchery, so you are the last one to make report, if only for the sake of the completion.”

So Lyris starts filling them in. She starts at the beginning and makes a slow progress to the end, and tries to avoid cursing, because that is not going to make the report any better. She gets to the second worst bit: “That is when I lost Zur and Sheni, but I had to go further, as there was no way back.”

At that, Sheni stops poking with a scavenged piece of a Mantis pincer into the crack in the floor tiles, and says: “I was okay. I tried to call after you, but you probably couldn't hear me. After walking in circles for some time and slashing other ugly bugs and desecrating some unholy altar, I found Zur stumbling through the tunnels, talking to himself. He led me out of there and we decided to catch our breaths and wait for you, not that you took long, really.” She makes it sound easy, but by the weary look of it it isn't hard to realize it wasn't exactly a walk through rose gardens.

“Glad to hear you didn't get into any more trouble,” Lyris nods, and then she turns back to Varen. “Then I contacted you, and after that I walked the only possible way, until I reached something that I'd describe as a library. There was a Daedra.”

“A ghost cat?” the Silvenar asks for clarification.

Lyris shakes her head. “No. He – I assume it was a he anyway – had a kyn look to him. Mannimarco called him Iddaroth, in the context I guess that was the type, and also Zykkm-ahtro.”

Sai scalds his thigh with the tea he has just dropped. Varen pales several shades, while Clivia makes a sound that is between a growl and a gasp.

Tharn lets go off his nose, which takes it as a permission to run blood, and with a forcibly calm voice he says: “I do hope that you were going to mention that damned necromancer's presence properly, not only as a throw-off comment. Do continue, Titanborn, you've already cracked this wasp nest open.”

Lyris throws a pebble at him, but it misses. “I tried to sneak past him – Stop laughing! I can sneak, I am two meters of pure stealth! – when Mannimarco walked in. I didn't recognize him at all until Zykkm-ahtro called him by name, then it clicked. It is hard to describe. As if he was Mannimarco, but also never was, you know?” By the look of it, they don't know. “Nevermind. Anyway, this was your great moment, Varen, to call me.”

A moment of silence. Then, Varen: “My apologies. I did not intend to worsen the situation.”

“You managed to do exactly that. Mannimarco went after me, I don't think he recognized me at all. He accused the Daedra of treason, attacked us both, and then he got speared through.” She reaches for the kettle, because all of sudden she desires to sip something, anything, really. “The Daedra and I then talked a bit. It appears that he works as an Emissary for something called the Triumvirate, and that he and Mannimarco were sent into the Tangle for the exact same reason as Sheni, Zur, and I were.”

Varen tilts his head: “And the Seer's Eye?”

“Lost it there. I thought that if I take it off, it would stop drawing attention, but I wasn't quick enough. Then it had to fall out of my hand during the battle. I wasn't exactly keen on staying there and looking for it, not with Zykkm-ahtro breathing down my neck.” She folds arms, and then she remembers: “Oh, but I brought you something. Well, it's probably for Tharn, but still, here.”

She reaches underneath her chest plate and fishes out the loose papers. They are a bit dog-eared all over, but very legible. She hands them over along with Zur's cloak which they turned into a make-shift sack for the books she pilfered from the Mantis library.

“Any words of insight on any of that?” Lyris asks the whole company.

“Nothing Raz would like to be a part of any official report.”

Tharn has something slightly more useful: “I find this Therisse very troubling. Whatever or whoever it is, what both you and Sai have witnessed strongly suggest at a Daedric Prince. Yet I am very certain that there isn't any of this name.” He briefly leafs through one of the book, and Lyris reads it in his eyes that he is already attaching a mental note “Read Later, Important” to it. “However, as for your new daedric friend, I can tell you this much-”

“He's definitely not my friend.”

“He is not your immediate enemy, that is as friendly as you can get with a Daedra,” both Tharns, Abnur and Clivia, speak in unison, even with the same diction.

But it is only the battlemage who continues: “Anyway, *iddaroth*, literally translated means

*corrupted one*, in the sense of conversion from one state of being to the daedric nature. In my whole life, however, I have not met with a faction or race of Daedras called by this name. Usually it is used as a derogatory term for new initiates of daedric cults. As for the name Zykkm-ahtro,” he over-articulates the words as if it offended him on personal level, “I doubt that it is the Daedra's true name.”

Everyone waits for him to elaborate on that, but when it does not happen, Sai takes one for the team and asks: “Why?”

“It is an untranslatable pun,” Tharn sighs. He wipes the blood off his lips and reaches behind himself for a half-empty bottle of full-moon wine. Lyris's quick glance confirms that it is not the first bottle he has relieved the Tenmar priests of. After he pours himself a second cup, the man continues: “It references the Gardens of Treason in Coldharbour, implying that at some point of existence he held the rank of an Impaler in Molag Bal's army.”

“So,” Lyris starts carefully, “that means his name is the Impaler?”

“More like Spiky,” Clivia mutters. Tharn very hesitantly nods at that.

The way back to Rimmen is quick and mildly unpleasant, as portals have the tendency to be. Once back there, people scatter: Shen and Athelheim lead Zur to a room where the Khajiit could have a lay down, and where maybe they can figure out what it is with him and what does it mean he is two people. Clivia and Razum-dar head to find Khamira to introduce Khuzar-ri to her, or maybe her to him. Nobody is sure where the Green Lady and Silvenar have disappeared to, but Lyris makes a mental note not to visit the western bathroom before the evening meal. Varen is in Calo's office, briefing him on the events, while Tharn has disappeared into his room along with the books Lyris brought him.

Lyris decides to interrogate Zamarak before he also finds something to do, but just as she is stopping him, Sai appears in the doorway. “Snow Lily, a word?”

Damn. There is going to be some lecture on the account of not doing anything dangerous, isn't there? “I was just about to talk with Zamarak here,” she tries to ice-skate out of it.

Sai and Zamarak exchange looks. In the end, Sai says that he'll be quick about it and Zamarak takes a step back. And that is how Lyris finds herself pulled into a tight hug and hears Sai's choked whisper: “I was so worried about you.”

“Hey there, Sai,” She pats him on the back and rests her chin on the top of his head, “I was fine. I'm the Daughter of Giants, remember? Things have a problem with me, I don't have a problem with things.”

“I know, but I was still worried.” Sai pulls away, so he can look her in the face. “Lord Aquilarios and Tharn could not scry to find you until I arrived back in Tenmar. We did not know where you were or even if you were alive.”

“Why couldn't they? Isn't Varen now the best scryer in all of Tamriel?”

Sai folds his hand behind his back and squares up his shoulders: “The details,” he says with a strained fake Nibenay accent, “are too complicated for your little brain, I don't want you to strain anything.”

“I am not going to ask Tharn for an explanation,” Lyris frowns.



Sai nods. "And neither did I. I am now headed to the Fighters' Guild if you would be searching for me later," he smiles at her. He then bows to her and to Zamarak, who returns the gesture, and departs.

Lyris cannot not notice the way Zamarak is eyeing her as they are walking out of the halls into the garden. "What?"

"This one does not mean to pry, but how long have you two been together?"

"We aren't," she replies courtly. If there is a sour bitterness of regret to it, she refuses to acknowledge it.

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" She makes a grand gesture which takes in all of Elsweyr and most of the Tamriel along with it. "Too busy."

"Well, then Zamarak will do his best to resolve this Mantis invasion as soon as possible," the Khajiit smiles lightly, "so you can have a break."

"Please do," Lyris groans and sits down on a bench strategically placed in the shade of a large tree she doesn't dare to guess the name of. "My life has been one nightmare of the Manor of Monsters, I want a retirement." Not too peaceful and lazy, but anything where the fate of the world wouldn't rest on her shoulders almost all the time would be nice. Fate of the whole world is pretty heavy, and Lyris's back have been in a lot of pain lately.

Zamarak hums, that one day someone ought to play that game with him, now that his curiosity was sparked. "However, Lyris-do, this one does not think this is what you wanted to talk to him about. What concerns you?"

"Yes, well... What happened to Cadwell? Where is he?"

Zamarak then proceeds to tell her about the Dance of Legends in the sanctum in the depths of the Sunspire, and while Lyris doesn't really understand it, she has the feeling that Zamarak also hasn't really got a firm grasp on what exactly happened there. What is clear is that Cadwell knew that Khunzar-ri would appear, and didn't want to be around him. "That's perfectly understandable," she comments on it.

For a long time they sit there, side by side, listening to snakes slithering in the dry grass. Finally, after what feels like forever, Zamarak says: "This one is already missing sir Cadwell."

"Hmph," she agrees. "We probably shouldn't talk about him in front of Khuzar-ri. I mean, we've got Tharn here already, we don't need any more tension, do we?"

"Yes. But Zamarak hates to lie."

"This is not lying," Lyris scratches the back of her hair only to found pieces of ash and chitinous carapace behind her fingernails, "this is... I don't know, it's just avoiding the truth. We don't have to- What's that?"

She turns her head to the entrance, because she can hear raised voices from there. She quickly finds out it is Varen and Tharn, engaged in a very heated conversation which requires a lot of wide gestures.

Without even thinking about the, Lyris leaves the comfort of the bench to confront those two

idiots. Zamarak follows her. “Hey, having an argument without me?”

“We are not arguing,” Tharn acknowledges her presence, but does not turn to face her. “Or at least, I am not arguing. I am not certain what Varen here is doing, and I don't really care.”

“Uh-huh.” Talking to Tharn is in many ways similar to talking to spirits of the winter from children storybooks: deeply frustrating, often useless, and you need to pay close attention to the words used. “And what it is you *are* doing then?”

The look Tharn gives her is that of a cornered skeever. He forces a smile wide enough to make it seem his head has just split in half. “I'm panicking, Titanborn.”

This concerns Lyris quite a lot. “That's new.”

“I wouldn't say new, but it I haven't done it for almost a century and half, and I am definitely out of practice,” Tharn nods. “Can't say I missed it.”

“What is it that it is so terrifying?” Zamarak's resolve strikes to the heart of the matter like a spear.

Varen's voice is low and full of the gravity he usually reserves for the prophecies of the Elder Scrolls: “We have learned unsettling information regarding Therisse and their origins. What the books and documents you have brought revealed is more than disturbing. If the words are true, and I am afraid they are, then all Tamriel is in grave danger.”

Lyris knows she should take this seriously, but it has been a long day and these two are being annoyingly cryptic and freaking out. So there is nothing holding her back from rolling her eyes and saying: “What, again?”

“I would say more like *still*,” Tharn sighs, “but this threat is new. And literally otherworldly. I hate to repeat myself over and over like a windmill, so if you two don't mind, Varen and I are going to spoil your dinner with this. Still not sure if I should announce it before we eat or after, both has its risk.” He rubs his temples. “I need some fresh air and solitude. I'll take a walk.” Without saying as much as a goodbye he heads deeper into the garden.

“Oh, Zamarak will join you!”

“What part of the word *solitude* did you not understand?!” But besides that, Tharn has no other complaints, so they disappear among the topiaries together, side by side.

Lyris is looking at them until she cannot see them any longer, and then she turns to Varen: “A question, if I might?”

“I do not promise to have the answers you seek, Lyris.” The two of them slowly make their way back to the bench. Lyris's spot is still warm, but in Elsweyr everything is still warm, except the desert in night which is on the contrary absolutely freezing.

“Oh, I think that in this case you definitely have. Sai has mentioned to me that you couldn't scry for me. I just want to know what that was about.”

“Ah. That.” Varen is silent for a long time, and then he pulls his legs on the bench and knots them together. “You recall that in the Harbourage Abnur Tharn cast a spell on us that was meant to make us practically invisible too scrying and divination, is that so?”

“It didn't work, though,” Lyris shrugs. “Mannimarco knew about us all the same.”

“But only because Sai Sahan had a spell on him that tracked his every step, which we didn't know about at the time. The point is, do you remember Abnur Tharn removing the shrouding spell from you?” At that Lyris frowns and shakes her head. Varen continues: “That is because he did not. The spell is still active.”

“Uh, so... Nobody can ever find me with magic?”

“More or less.”

“But you did find me. Twice, even, right? Sai said you did, and also you knew I was in the Rift when you sent me the letter in which you two asked me to come.”

Varen smiles: “Yes, but in fact I was not searching for you. I was searching for the shrouding spell. It is a good little trick which took some time developing. In fact, the first time I realized that you can scry for a spell that shrouds an object or a person from scrying, was when Abnur Tharn used this trick to locate Sai Sahan in the Halls of Torment. I only refined that spell.”

Lyris's brow furrows. She doesn't understand how magic works, not much, but this still seems too tricky. “Alright, but wouldn't such a spell find you every shroud like this? A lot of, what you call them, false-positives?”

“The details are a bit complicated.” When he notices Lyris's murderous look, he sighs and continues: “I needed a consenting copy of that spell, which was provided to me by Sai.”

“Couldn't you use the spell on yourself for that? Or on Tharn?”

“Tracing a spell on oneself is difficult. Let's say it is as if you wanted to see the cut of a dress you are currently wearing. And as for Tharn...” Varen pauses and looks into the distance for a moment. “I don't think he trusts other people enough to let him inspect all the protective magic coating him. He does not trust me like this, anyway.”

Lyris bites lip. “Well, that's depressing,” she concludes. “Let's get some food.”

## Chapter End Notes

Why Lyris heard all she wanted to hear, and said all she wanted to say, a lot of other characters didn't get to have that. If it was from their point of view, I'd make it more obvious, but since this is Lyris's POV, she is oblivious to it.  
I just wanted you to know.

# The Things Found in Fire

## Chapter Summary

There are things people should tell to each other. This is that chapter when they finally tell them.

## Chapter Notes

It has been brought to my attention you have not seen my Very Motivational Picture



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lyris's intention of finding something to snack on, however well-meant, meets with failure. Varen might be sated with a sweetroll, but she herself desperately wishes for something that hasn't got any sugar in. So she makes her excuses, leaves one blind man in the good care of the cooks, and

retreats from the palace kitchen.

After a bit of roaming around she recalls where Sai said he was going, and so she heads out to find the Fighters' Guild. Once she reaches the bottom of the stairs leading from the palace, painfully aware that she'll have to climb them all the way up again on her way back, she realizes that finding the Guild might be a tad bit difficult. She hasn't got the chance to take a look around Rimmen at all. Well, she is a Nord. Nords don't get lost. Only a little geographically confused at worst. And the palace is standing up top a rather tall hill, so no matter how confused in geography she happens to be, she'll find her way back.

In the end Lyris settles to find the Fighters' Guild by sound. Fighters and warriors tend to be rather loud, clinking armour and weapons, and shouting lewd obscenities at one other. The only way to distinguish them from the Undaunted is that the Fighters do all of this sober.

On her first try she finds the Bazaar. The sound of haggling is almost deafening. What is that one advice about Khajiit and marketplaces? Oh yes: Don't bring anything you are not willing to lose in your pockets. Since she hasn't brought her pouch of coins – It is still safely at the bottom of her bag in her room in the palace – she doesn't feel like doing any shopping. So she pushes her way through the crowd, which is not hard as people tend to get out of the way of a half-giantess with a resting bitch-face syndrome, and carries on.

The promising sound of smith tools leads her down the the stairs hidden behind a corner. To her great disappointment it turns out to be the artisan quarter of Rimmen, and not the Fighters' Guild. Somebody runs into her and spills armful of bones when the impact sends them tumbling back on their behind. If they weren't so profoundly apologizing to Lyris for the next five minutes or so, she wouldn't have noticed anything happening.

As it is, she gets down on her knees and helps the poor Argonian to gather back the bones for... for whatever it is the lizard is working on. That turns out to be a bad idea, because the endless apologies are replaced by even less-ending words of gratitude. Lyris has neither the time nor the nerves for that, so she turns to the Argonian and asks: "Listen, would you know where the Fighters' Guild is in here?"

"Oh yes, I do," they reply. "You need to go past the alchemy stall," the Argonian points through the rows of working tables, "take the stairs down, cross the square, and once you are at the end of it take the stairs on your left. You come up to the warehouse, the Fighters' Guild will be on your right."

Lyris mumbles a thank you and heads in the suggested direction. Once she reaches the main plaza, she realizes how much livelier Rimmen is compared to, say Riften. Or Windhelm. She has to elbow her way through the people to even reach the stairs. On her way she notices an inn, which might be worth exploring later. Then she remembers her experiences with Khajiiti alcohol, and reconsiders the idea of visiting any inn or tavern in the Elsweyr.

The Fighters's Guild gives the feeling of a repurposed workhouse, and the other half of the building is in fact used by the Mages' Guild, which has to lead to rather explosive and humorous situations. She barges in like she owns the place, the only way you can enter the Guild without attracting attention.

Sai is in the second room she pays visit, the training hall. Once you have seen one Fighters' training hall, you've seen them all. Sai is currently sparring with two women, they've been at it for some time now, because all three of them are sweaty enough to wring.

Lyris leans on the wall by the doorway and watches with mild interest. She doesn't doubt that Sai is

going to come out of the spar victorious, but it is a delight for the eye to watch him. He notices her, and grins in acknowledgement, but doesn't allow himself to be distracted.

There are no weapons included, that is the most interesting part.

A large Senche, probably Senche-raht come to think of it, approaches her. "Interested in brawling? This one could show you *real* strength."

Lyris gives him a long look. She considers the half-closed eyes, the purring voice, the swishing tail. "If you've come here to screw me, I'm here with him." The Khajiit obviously flattens like a pierced baloon. Nevertheless, Lyris continues: "But if you want to spar with me, we take the floor after them, what do you say?"

As there has already formed a betting pool around the two of them – Don't forget this is the Fighters' Guild, there are always betting pools – the large cat cannot back out without losing a damn deal of reputation.

And that is how seven minutes later, even before everyone is done patting victorious Sai on the back, Lyris throws a fully grown Senche-raht across the room and through the window.

There is stunned applause which last exactly until the Khajiit limps back into the room accompanied by a rather dusty Abnur Tharn whose expression clearly says that he is nowhere near drunk enough to deal with all of this.

"I've heard that Khajiits always land on all four, but that they land on me *that* is new," he sighs as soon as he notices Lyris and Sai. "Have you two got a moment?"

"But I've just got here!" Lyris protests. Adrenaline is still rushing past her ears, and already Tharn has shown up to spoil her time off.

"Hmm, and still you managed to throw a cat in my face."

"You don't know it was me," Lyris crosses her arms. "Could have been anyone."

It rewards her a withered look and a half-finished comment about usual suspects. "So in case you two are done throwing people around and showing-off in general, I'd talk to you. Not here," he adds after a beat. With that, Tharn heads out and doesn't even turn around to make sure they are following him.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Snow Lily," Sai whispers as he takes her by arm and leads her to the door.

Lyris feels the gears in her head turning and spinning like a Dwemer foundry. The most obvious conclusion is either something extra about Therisse, whatever that is, Zur's two-people condition, or Cadwell. She hopes it is about Zur. It seems like the least problematic of topics.

Tharn has rounded a corner and they find him sitting on a patch of grass near a marlstone well, backs rested against a wall. Lyris realizes it is one of the city walls. When she looks around and notices the palace just above them but slightly to the left, she realizes that the whole afternoon-to evening she has been walking around the city in one big circle. That thought is extra irritating.

It doesn't help her uneasiness to be towering over Tharn like this. If he was standing, it would be bearable, but this height difference is just too much. She sits down, and Sai follows the suit,

because it would be awkward if he was the only person standing. Or maybe that isn't his reasoning, Lyris doesn't dare to guess what is going on in that secretive head of his.

“So,” she says when Tharn doesn't spit out whatever frog has been sitting on his mind. “You wanted to talk. If you actually said something, for once it could help the situation.”

Tharn briefly smiles, but it lacks any humour or joy. “Very well, Titanborn. But before I start, I'd strongly appreciate it if neither of you punched me, threw any more things at me, or yelled at me. Especially the last, I had to deal with Varen shouting in my ear for the better part of the day, and I've had enough.”

Sai ruffles his beard. Some pieces of Mantis carapace falls out of it, but everybody is too polite to comment on it. “That doesn't sound like something I want to hear.”

“Whether or not you want to hear it is irrelevant. I concede that Varen is right and I should have told you outright.”

“Then,” Lyris taps the ground impatiently, “stop dancing around it and just spill it out.”

Tharn meets her eyes. The look they exchange is similar to all those times when they challenged each other out of pure spite and desire to see the other one fall, but there is something different about it this one time. An admission of defeat even before the fight is started.

“I can't use magic.”

It shouldn't take Lyris that long to take that sentence over, but the shock of it hits her harder than that blood bolt earlier today.

As it seems, Sai also has a difficulty understanding, because he blurts out: “What?”

“Oh come one,” Tharn slumps against the wall and the back of his head hits the brick with a sound that implies it has to be rather painful. “It's four words, none of them longer than four syllables, I couldn't make myself any more clear even if I spelled it out for you.”

Sai rubs his temples and sighs. “My bad. I said *what*, what I mean is *why*?”

Tharn only shakes his head and avoids looking at them. “If I knew that, I wouldn't be having this problem.

There is something nagging on Lyris's mind. She addresses it out loud: “But back at my home you didn't seem to have any difficulties with using magic. Except when you turned wood to charcoal, that is, but I guess that's the side effect of being a living bottle of dragonfire. You could have mentioned that, by the way,” she adds as an afterthought.

“I had a lot of difficulties with using magic, I believe I had even said so,” Tharn waves his hand in dismissal. “But at the time I blamed it on my less than desirable state in the process of recovery. In fact, at the time I believed my condition was improving, when I merely traded one affliction for another.”

“I recall,” Sai says slowly, “that you mentioned your power degrading in Senchal, although you have never quite explained that.”

Tharn cups his hands in front of his mouth and nose and takes a few breaths. “Yes. Here comes that part when I stress again that if you didn't yell at me or inflicted any physical harm on me, I'd be very grateful.”

Lyris and Sai look at each other. Lyris mouths the word “amulet” at her friend, because this is her best guess as to what Tharn might have on mind.

“Has anyone ever explained to you the theory of communicating vessels applied to magic?”

“Well, I know what it is when it's not applied to magic. Right now I'm imagining two wells and an underground tunnel” Lyris tries. As long as water can freely flow from one vessel to another, the surface level of the water is in the same height in both containers. Some wells function on this principle, draining water from a spring on the other side of the hill. In fact, it was Sai who explained it to her once, wasn't it?

Tharn smiles at her: “Good. So now only imagine that the liquid in your vessels is *magicka*, and your vessels don't have to be necessarily wells, but they can be people or magical objects.” When put like that, it sounds simple enough.

“Where are you getting with that?” Sai asks with a lot of caution.

“Well, let's say, strictly theoretically, that you have one vessel that is practically full.” Tharn pauses and continues only when they confirm for him that yes, they've got it. “Now you connect it to another well which by comparison is far greater in volume, and also absolutely empty. What happens?”

Both would be almost dry, that's what. Lyris feels the omen of something bad – her teeth vibrating in her mouth. They aren't really vibrating, mind you, but it feels like it. Clenching her jaw only makes it worse.

Sai cracks his fingers as he speaks: “In this strict theory of yours, how much bigger this other vessel, well, whatever, is?”

“Unimaginably bigger.”

“Strictly theoretically,” Lyris barges into the exchange of clarifications, “is one of those vessels you and the other the amulet of Kings?”

“Titanborn, do you know what *strictly theoretically* actually means?”

She has an inkling, but that doesn't matter. “Am I right?”

Tharn capitulates. “Yes. Yes, you are. Before you break my nose again, I might add that it also nearly killed me, so I paid for it already, no need to inflict any more justice on me.” When he notices that Lyris is not about to punch him, and instead has a very worried look on her face, much like Sai, he continues: “I didn't have any high hopes for using the full powers of the Amulet to restore order to Cyrodiil, after all I am not of the proper lineage for that, but I assumed I could do something at least. That I managed to link myself to it was a miraculous results of countless weeks of trials and errors. In that moment I had also learned that the great source of power was virtually empty.”

“And it began sucking in your power, eh?” Lyris rolls around in her place so she ends up sitting next to Tharn. In this moment he doesn't look much battlemage-ish or whatever fancy titles he has accumulated over the years. He looks quite old and fairly beaten. For the first time she realizes how hard it has to be for him to swallow all his pride and dislike towards her and Sai and tell them all of this. Truth be told, she can't imagine herself in his stead.

“How could that come close to killing you?” Sai does not understand.



“The last time I checked, Sai Sahan,” Tharn spits the words out as if they were a particularly bad batch of wine, “the regular lifespan of men was not one hundred and sixty. No matter what I say about healthy exercise and clean living, let's admit it, at this point it is mostly my own magic what is keeping me in one piece.”

The silence that settles among them could be cut and served as a solid main course at a court. Lyris finally realizes what has been setting her teeth on the edge: “Tharn?”

“Yes?”

She forces herself to ask calmly: “Is the Amulet of Kings full of blasted dragonfire?”

The look Sai gives her is priceless. If she stuck a mammoth tusk in his arse, he couldn't yelp in a more comical way. When Tharn nods, at first hesitantly but then gives in to the admission, Lyris has the feeling she ultimately broke her Redguard friend.

It takes a rather long moment of Sai opening and closing his mouth in an attempt to say something and shaking his hands trying to convey his state of mind in a gesture, before he finally gives up and sinks his head into his hands. Lyris and Tharn wait for him to get somewhere. They don't have to wait long.

“What have I ever done to anyone?” Sai rises his head and looks at them through his fingers. “I know what you two did, but what are my sins to deserve this?”

“You put comberries on your flat bread with tomato paste,” Tharn replies to him in the same moment that Lyris says: “That's what you get for using bittergreen soap.”

Sai gives them a patient smile: “I want you both to know that the only reason I am not going to strangle you with my bare hands is that you both have very good points.”

Lyris lifts her hand to Tharn for a fist bump, but he flinches away, so it's a bit awkward. They take that awkward moment to sober up, because while fooling around is good for digesting bad news, there is still more gristle left to chew on.

Sai has the strongest metaphorical jaw, the literal one belongs to Lyris, so he bites into it: “So, a battlemage who cannot do magic. Who else knows about this?”

Tharn suddenly finds the branches of the nearby tree very interesting. “Khamira,” he replies quickly. “I have told her the day we have arrived, but she insisted that I remain here all the same. And seeing that Varen figured it out on his own, it means that anyone else with at least third of their brain working could have realized it as well. I wouldn't be surprised if Cadwell knew, as Cadwell always seems to have the most peculiar of knowledge, but I haven't told him myself. So, including you, that is four people for certain.”

“Are you sure that your daughter-”

“Titanborn, my daughter has many qualities – which also happen to be her greatest vices – among them ambition and the will to act. In turn, I know her better than she will ever know herself.”

Tharn smiles like the sun above a muckheap when he finishes his thought: “If she knew about my current predicament, we wouldn't be having this conversation and Morag Tong would be by far a richer cult of assassins than it is now.”

“That statement is incorrect,” says Sai drily.

“What, you doubt my own blood wouldn't hire a professional organization to deliver my head to her

on a silver plate? Please, within Tharns this is a well developed tradition. Having an attempt on your life is the ritual passage of adulthood, so to say.”

“For that I do not care,” Sai shrugs. Given his stature, it is a rather impressive gesture. “But I have yet to see an assassin that would be able to get past me.”

Lyris snorts: “The whole point of assassins is that you don't see them, Sai.”

“Then I have encountered only very bad assassins.”

Another long silence. It looks like Tharn doesn't know that to say, Sai has nothing more to say, and Lyris is using this downtime to formulate her questions into a web of words through which the truth wouldn't slip like... like a fish, that is a saying, right?

After consulting her inner thesaurus, which is one of those Vvardenfell lizards that is very good with words, she finally finds the proper words to use: “If I understand this right, with the Amulet of Kings being charged by dragonfire, it is not leeching your power over magicka away, right?” When Tharn confirms that with a vague hum, she continues: “So if it isn't that you don't have the power, what is the problem?”

“I have yet to determine the root of this, but using the previous analogy of wells and water, the bucket which I used to draw the water from the well appears to have lost its bottom.”

That is a bit confusing analogy for Lyris, because she can't translate it to what it actually means for using magic. It apparently shows, because Tharn takes a mental step back and starts over: “The proficiency of every user of magic – or modern magic anyway, as we now understand it – is founded on three pillars: Firstly it is the amount of power one has, the strength of one's magical talent which as just explained is no longer a problem for me. Then the ability to apply magic to variety of situations, or in another words the quality and flexibility with which one can use their power, something that unfortunately most mages struggle with, but I can proudly say that I have never been one of them. And finally it is the grasp one has of their own powers which determines whether or not they are able to reach for the power and use it to their liking. In regards to that, right now my power is a bar of soap and I'm trying to catch it all over the bathroom.”

Lyris has an offshoot thought about how that analogy somehow is even better because of Tharn's sudden vulnerability and the fact that in bathroom one is most often naked. That thought better not continue anywhere. Out loud she says: “Oh.” And then: “What now?”

Tharn sighs: “Honestly, I didn't think I'd get this far with this. My assumption was that by we would have gotten into a fight, verbal or physical, and one of would angrily stomp off away, relieving me from this conversation. Obviously, I was wrong. As it is, however, I have already said all that I had to say.” He rises to his feet and leans on the wall just for the moment until his head stops spinning. “I really should head back. Maybe now that I have ruined your date, Varen will finally stop yelling at me about trust and responsibly and whatever else he finds me lacking. See you at the dinner.”

Lyris and Sai watch him disappear into the gathering ink of the evening. A guardsman passes them by and lights a lantern on the corner.

“Do you think that Zamarak figured out?” Lyris turns to Sai with a sudden suspicion. “He strikes me as one too clever for his own good.”

“I wouldn't believe that. Not that long ago he asked me what colour the Red Diamond is.” He waits until Lyris's eyebrows drop back down and stop invading her hairline, before he adds: “I told him

it's blue.”

The dinner is exactly as grim as Lyris thought it would be, and not amount of delicacies are able to lighten the mood. Not after Tharn and Veren take turns in explaining that apparently there exists something as another Nirn but living next door, and that the Mantis are invading neighbours from this world. That Therisse is the Daedric Prince of Breaking, Walker Between Borders, Devourer of Time, Dragon of Devastation, Mother to All Monsters of Men and Mer, World's Corruption, and the Gold Throne among the Triumvirate. What does this Daedric Prince want is unclear, but certainly it isn't going to make the sugar-cane grow any taller.

Who the rest of the Triumvirate is, presumably it has other two members, is unclear. The texts Lyris has brought strongly suggest that Molag Bal holds the Bone Throne – Could everyone stop laughing? I am explaining to you our world's demise. Oh, fine, let me know when you are done, Varen pass the wine, be so kind. – But whose behind sits on the Steel Throne is quite cryptic.

Or as Khunzar-ri puts it as he puts his fork down for the last time: “It makes Zar almost miss the dragons. Almost.” Everyone interprets it as a sign from the Divines to leave the dining hall.

Lyris wants to catch up with Sai, but considered the time of the month and both her and Sai's slow approach to unexplored territories, there is no reason to escalate it that quickly. Instead she runs into Tharn, which is unexpected, their rooms don't share the corridor.

“Got lost while sneaking out with a snack for later?” she nods to the plate of various sample dishes. Not that she is blaming Tharn, the pudding was indeed delicious and she's had a double serving herself.

“No,” he shakes his head. “I am going to check up on your Khajiit partner. He didn't show up for dinner, and I don't think anyone has seen him since the rest of the Eyes dropped him in his bed.”

She cannot help but feel a ting of guilt. She should have helped. She should have never let it happen in the first place. No use to cry over the spilled milk, though, she can only mop it up and carry on. “Do you think he is... going to be fine?”

Tharn's face darkens. “I have seen more than one soul-melded person in Coldharbour. Their life expectancy was measured in hours, in the most optimistic scenarios.” When he notices Lyris quickly losing the colour from her face, he adds: “But from what I understood, the process which caused this in this case was quite different. Instead of forcing two foreign souls to fuse, a part of something that Zur carried within himself was enhanced.”

“And that something was another person?”

“I hope so,” he replies as he reaches for the door handle. “Because if not, then the power Therisse grants to its minions is something to be truly concerned about.”

The door opens and reveals a figure sitting cross-legged on the floor next to a candle, hunched over a book. By silhouette it is definitely not a Khajiit, or if it is, it is one of those more human-looking, so certainly not Zur.

Both Tharn and Lyris are on an edge, because they see the blue markings of dro-m'Athra glowing on his face. When the figure notices them, it looks up and they see unnaturally blue glowing eyes. Elven eyes. The man puts his book aside and stands up.

“Hello,” he says. Lyris recognizes the Stonefall accent, most likely from around Davon's Watch. “I

would ask you to keep quiet, Zur has just fallen asleep, and I don't really want to disturb him.” When he puts the candle onto the mirrored lamp on the table, the room brightens up. Now it can be seen it is really a Dunmer, only his eyes are blue instead of red, and his skin bears the blue marks of void, which in the light quickly fade away and out of sight.

“And you are...?” Lyris let's the question hang in the air like a drying laundry.

“Our apologies. I am Gadris. As you have pointed out earlier our condition of double-soulness,” he makes a vague gesture towards Tharn, “I am the other person.”

Tharn sets the plate with food down on the table. Lyris notices his hand slightly shaking, the ruby ring sending red glints flashing across the room. “Would you mind explaining where exactly you've come from? I am quite certain I would have noticed if there were two of you earlier.”

Gadris smiles and sits back down on the bed. His voice has a silk-softness to it when he speaks: “As I have analysed Zur's memories of the event, I have been brought back from a negative imprint of myself which was left in Zur's soul after the unfortunate Coldharbour incident which has left me somewhat vitally indisposed.”

He pauses at that and bites into his knuckles. “Damn, we'll have to explain that in the Guild. I am not looking forward to that. Ullima is going to have questions.”

“Are you,” Lyris is trying to sound unconcerned and is aware that she is failing that, “going to be okay?”

“Yes, yes. We are great,” Gadris nods enthusiastically. “The original soul-meld created a terrible strain which almost killed us both, but... This is fine. In fact, we believe we have never felt better. He's missed me so much,” he adds in a whisper, “I am touched.” The elf wraps arms around his own chest and produces a distant smile, the exact same behaviour, Lyris notices, that Zur has been showing the whole way from the Tangle back to Tenmar.

She elbows Tharn in ribs: “See? They're fine. Let's leave these two love doves with their dinner, yes?”

Tharn mumbles something about how he hates it when she is trying to be the voice of reason, but backs away from the room all the same. They stand there in an awkward silence when neither of them turns to go to their respective rooms – Tharn would have to go back the same way he came here, while Lyris would have to continue this corridor to the very end. But if someone glued their shoes to the floor, it wouldn't make any difference, because they can't seem to budge from the spot.

“Look, Tharn,” Lyris finally manages. “I'm sorry. Not as in that I am apologizing, but that I feel with you. I don't pretend to know what you are going through right now, but I'm sure I've been through something similar, so I at least can understand a bit.”

It is amazing at how many things Tharn is able to look just so he wouldn't have to look at her. “Don't pity me, Titanborn. I am neither wanting nor deserving of that.”

She pretends not to hear it. How could she not pity him? How could she not feel with him when he reminds her, oh so much, of what she was like when she was on the chain in the Foundry of Woe? She doesn't tell him that, that's not something she'd be willing to say out loud, neither it is something he'd want to hear, not now, not ever.

“I probably can't help you, not right now. But if there is anything I could do for you, let me know, yes?”

When Tharn opens his mouth, Lyris expects him to say something along the lines that the greatest help would be if she left him the heck alone. What comes out instead is: “I am not really used to this amount of compassion. Definitely not from you. It will... It is going to take a while for me to sort out what to do with it.” He lets out an uneasy chuckle. “But I thank you. I appreciate it.”

She smiles at him, pats him on the shoulder, and finally turns to make her way to the bed. “Good night, Tharn.”

“Good night, Lyris.”

## Chapter End Notes

Is this emotional enough? I never know how to handle emotional writing.

Now, hands up who remembers Ullima!

# Interlude: A Reply to V. Galerion's "Evolution of the Multiverse Theory" (by [Redacted])

## Chapter Summary

Atheleim is not who he seems to be, and he should be kept away from pencils.

Changelog: 14th January 2020 - So I have just now noticed that nowhere it says what the hell it is that Atheleim got, so it has been added now.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The concept of self is a troubling thing when you change names to fit into roles, and change roles to be inconspicuous. The important part is not to be bothered by. In this way, Atheleim has truly mastered his work, because he sheds selves like salamanders shed skin. The only difference is that he then doesn't eat the shedding.

With each incarnation he is more adept at it, which means that Atheleim is less concerned about his self than, say Gawellus was. Or Varitalas. Oh, Auri-el, Varitalas really was terrible at all of this. Although, Varitalas was barely fifty and had an adolescent crisis going on at the time, so he shouldn't be judged that harshly for his failures.

He is no longer Varitalas nor Gawellus, not Isentel, not Menneloah. He is Atheleim now. But even as Atheleim he has his duties which are bound and unchanging, and they are best done far away from curious eyes.

That is why he is currently sitting in a nook formed by the complicated curves of the roof of the royal palace of Rimmen. It hasn't been exactly easy getting here, and it will be quite the challenge to get back down without raising any attention or questions. And even though he has quadruple-checked that no one sees him nor hears him, he holds the delicate crystal ball in his lap, shielded from the outside world by his knees. The reflection he sees in the ball is not flattering, partially caused by the strange angle, partially because of the distortion.

He has been postponing this in a very silly hope that the situation would resolve itself without the necessity of contacting his superior, but it didn't. He also has been waiting for a moment when he would be alone and unobserved, and only gave up waiting for the opportunity this evening and actively searched for the right conditions, instead of expecting them to come to him on their own.

The words he speaks to activate the communication spell wouldn't be recognized by many on Nirn. The crystal lights up bright blue of the deep seas and brilliant skies, and then it fades out to reveal a face that is not Atheleim's, but is distorted in a similar manner as his reflection.

"Atheleim reporting, Ritemaster." His current position does not allow him to bow, so at least he clasps his hands together to give at least the seeming of formalities being done properly. He is aware that he is reporting in late, he should have had this conversation the moment he returned together with Sai Sahan from the Doomstone Keep. Instead he waited three days. Three days!

The old elf nods in acknowledgement. "Speak, friend, speak freely. I am listening."

“Your suspicion was correct.” Atheleim's voice is not shaking, and of that feat he is particularly proud of.

The Ritemaster does not respond immediately. He frowns, closes his eyes, pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a sigh. “That is... unfortunate. The whole order was hoping that you would prove my worries to be unfounded.”

Atheleim nods. “Already there are people of some importance involved and they know the situation for what it is. I suppose they don't understand the gravity and the full implications, but that a world parallel to ours has invaded Tamriel is clear to them. Even if the Order was able to interfere, it would be too noticeable. Besides that, I am afraid that this affair is too large scale for the order to contain.”

The Ritemaster then asks him who are the people involved, and so Atheleim tells him. It is met with a new spark in the master's eyes and a faint smile. “Four of the Five Companions. And you have mentioned Sir Cadwell. Even if no one else was there, I put my faith in these five.”

“Cadwell fled.”

“He will return,” the Ritemaster shakes his head in dismissal of such a foolish concern. “It would not be like him to get involved and then leave the battlefield before the war is done, especially when people he considers to be his are involved and endangered. And... Atheleim?”

“Yes, Ritemaster?”

“My faith is lies on you. I expect you to oversee the situation, and assume you will know what needs to be done to resolve this situation without any unnecessary sacrifices. The whole Psijic Order hopes that you will not have to compromise your identity, but if you find yourself in need of the authority the name of our Order carries, you are free to use it.”

Atheleim feels the weight of the new responsibility on his shoulders. There are already two people who would hang him on his own intestines if he told them he is a Psijic, first of them Razum-dar, to whom he explicitly lied. Galerion, his old classmate, wouldn't be crossed for Atheleim's education, but he would be enraged by the fact that Atheleim has forged several certificates and documents of the Mages' Guild in order to pass among the people as a member.

Fortunately, Raz barely speaks to him, and Galerion has never seen him since he has left the Artaeum. Auri-el knows that Atheleim prays every night that it will stay so.

“Thank you, Ritemaster,” he says, despite knowing word to word what the reply will be.

Iachesis does not disappoint him: “Do not thank me, this is a gift of a burden rather than a privilege. Fare well, my friend. May your path be clear.” His face fades out of the crystal ball before Atheleim gets to react.

He grits his teeth and bites down a handful of words which everyone in Nirn knows and which wouldn't do the Psijic Order much proud, besides the extensive knowledge of anatomy, perhaps. He hoped for an advice, for some guidance, maybe.

Instead he makes certain there is no one in the vicinity, and once certain no one is going to see him, he begins the painstakingly slow way back down on the ground. His report is important, but just as important is to maintain his appearance of a Mage cooperating with the Queen's Eyes, and as such he has to say goodbyes to Sheni, the Silvenar and the Green Lady, and the younger Tharn.

The messenger arrived tonight, breathless and a bit bruised after being very surprised by some

Mantis he met along the way. The situation in northern Valenwood has apparently escalated faster than anyone anticipated, and the Silvenar's presence is required. Since Clivia Tharn is striking an important negotiation with the Silvenar, she is leaving with him, just like the Green Lady who practically follows the man around like a guard welwa. Atheleim has no idea what the situation in northern Valenwood is, but it is safe to say that for the foreseeable future he is taking it off his list of potential holiday places.

Queen Khamira of Anequina has turned out to be a stress-eater, meaning that any gathering of the Company, as Sai Sahan insists on calling their disparate group, is quickly turned into a midday or midnight snack. However, there is only so much sugar Atheleim is able to consume in one sitting without feeling his teeth begging for mercy, and so he tries to entertain himself at such times with something else. Usually his go-to is art. It is a thing he is trying to avoid, but he cannot help it.

“This one sure the little still life would look better if you added in some colour,” Khuzar-ri notes when he peeks over his shoulder. “You carry around pigments, that Zar has noticed. Why avoid using them?”

“It is a bad fortune,” Atheleim replies. “Over the time I have noticed that as long as I keep to simple lead or charcoal, everything is alright.” His fingers burrow deep into his case for a softer pencil to do the shading on the carafe. His eyes almost don't leave the magnificent reflection of the light on the swirled glass.

“Ah,” the Khajiit rubs his beard. “But when you do colours?”

Atheleim, barely focusing on the words, tells him: “I subconsciously depict in colours things a moment before their demise.”

Finally, *finally* Sheni appears, preceded by Lyris Titanborn. The Bosmer has been practically glue to the woman since the first moment. Sheni has always had a thing for the big ones, as she once not-so-secretively told him. Atheleim pretended not to understand.

“There you are,” the Silvenar turns from his indeed very interesting discussion with Abnur Tharn, to which Atheleim stopped listening to the moment he overheard the word “coalition.”

“Here I am, and soon won't be. Bye everyone!” Sheni waves at them cheerfully. “Your Majesty. See you, Zamarak. Bye Mr. Prefect,” she goes out of her way to invade everyone's personal space and give them a hug and a kiss around the ears. “I'll miss you, Sai. Was great to meet you, Varen. Goodbye, Abnur.”

“Don't call me that.”

As the girl goes around the room saying her goodbyes, Atheleim puts his drawing down in anticipation of having his chest crushed and squeezed, because Sheni has never been one to half-ass a hug.

“Bye bye, Zar. Bye bye, Raz. Atheleim, I'm sure we'll- Oh!” As she was leaning over to hug him without him having to rise from the armchair, she extended her foot behind herself and kicked into the small table.

The sound of shattered glass as the carafe hits the floor is a quiet one, but in the sudden silence it is almost deafening.

“Oh, by Y'ffre, I am so sorry. How could I be so clumsy?” Sheni drops down to the floor and



despite the fact that everyone in the room is aware there are *already* servants rushing into the room with brooms, she tries to pick up the pieces and put them on the table where nobody can step on them.

“Oh, don't worry. This one has never liked it much anyway,” Khamira pulls her away gently from the site of the disaster.

Khunzar-ri joins her from the other side: “Besides, it had it coming.” He winks to Atheleim.

Atheleim looks at the broken glass and then back at his papers. “Oh, damn,” he whispers when he notices that while he has outdone himself with the shading, it is all done in soft blue.

The incident is, however, quickly forgotten.

Atheleim joins the Silvenar, The Green Lady, Sheni, and Clivia Tharn on their way to the door, while the rest of the Company scatters to do... whatever it is they do. Three of them have this kingdom to maintain, while Razum-dar and Khunzar-ri have made a very obscure bet which somehow involves trees and are headed to the garden to settle it. Abnur Tharn and Sai Sahan are making their way to the library, again, clinging to some hope they will find something that could help to resolve the situation. If the answer was in the library, they would have found it by now, Atheleim muses, because the two of them have basically pitched a camp there.

Varen stays behind along with Lyris who turns to him rather sharply: “Sir, a word.” But what it is she wants to talk about, Atheleim doesn't get to hear.

He walks side by side with Sheni through the quiet corridors of the palace, the other two Bosmer behind them, Clivia Tharn in front of them. They don't say anything, although Clivia Tharn speaks a lot, but her words do not carry any information. The words behind her words, however, betray that she is glad to leave the presence of her father.

Atheleim kisses Sheni goodbye in the main hall. It is hard to admit it to himself, but he is going to miss her. Over the past months she has grown on him. If she was ever inclined to men, he would love to know her better. As it is, she is not that kind of a woman, they are friends, and even that Atheleim sees as a hazard to his professionalism.

“Take care of them, you hear?” He instructs her. “Don't let them do anything stupid, charge mindlessly at bugs and the usual.”

“On my words as once-upon-a-time Vinedusk Ranger, I won't let the Silvenar do anything rash.”

The Bosmer hears his title and turns around: “I beg your pardon? Only me?”

“The Green Lady for sure can cleave her way through whatever she steps into. And if it's Tamriel versus Clivia, my betting money is on Clivia,” Sheni grins without any respect to her spiritual leader.

“Let's get moving,” the Green Lady sighs. “I cannot take staying indoors for any longer.”

“Just one moment, my dear Lady,” the Silvenar smiles softly. “Atheleim, you came late to the meeting, and as such I did not have the chance to give you a parting gift. Here.” He presses something small into his palm.

“I... Thank you,” Atheleim struggles for words. “I am afraid I did not know of this custom. I have nothing in return.”

“Stay safe, friend of Valenwood.” The watchful eyes look him over with a surprising softness. “That will be the greatest gift you can give to me in these troubling times.”

“Are you two quite finished?” Clivia Tharn groans. “I am the living avatar of patience, but by the Eight, even the Elder Council is quicker to reach an agreement. Why don't you make out while you are at it?”

Atheleim is not entirely opposed to the idea, but seeing the Green Lady's expression, he doesn't accept Tharn's dare. For that he prefers his kidneys unpierced too much. Thus he only watches the four people to walk out into the hot Elseweyr almost-noon.

Four small black silhouettes against the scorching sun. Then the door closes.

When he finally finds the confidence to open his hand, he learns that the present the Silvenar gifted him with is a large bone-white acorn. Upon closer inspection it turns out to be an actual bone carved into the shape of an acorn the cap of which can be twisted open and reveals the seed to be hollow.

He is still digesting the fact that they are gone when somebody clears their throat behind him. Atheleim, who until now has been absolutely certain there isn't anyone in the main hall besides him, does not jump into the air and does not yelp in surprise. He turns around with radiating external calmness he does not really truly feel on the inside.

It is a man, on the short side even by human standards, so probably not a Nord, too pale and thin-lipped and eagle-nosed to be a Redguard, no traces of mer descendancy and therefore not a Breton either. Unless Atheleim has been terribly misinformed somehow, it means that man is an Imperial. And if the logical deduction would be dismissed by anyone, the garb the man is wearing is a rather dead giveaway and could not be any clearer if it had “All glory to the Empire” embroidered on chest in crimson and silver.

On the top of that he looks eerily similar to Abnur Tharn. If that battlemage was in his early twenties and able to grow only a goatee. And if the shadows in the creases of his skin were more pronounced. And if he was slightly painful to look at, as though his body was composed of veiled sharp components.

The worst are the eyes. People usually don't notice the colour of one's eyes, not as often as literature would lead you to believe. Especially in men whose irises are far less distinctive than those of the mer. But these eyes draw attention. They are blue. Atheleim has seen this kind of a blue, it is the old colour of forgotten glaciers, of the night sky when the moons are too bright, of the Old Ways when they lash against an inexperienced mind.

“I hate to impose myself upon you in such a manner,” the man smiles at him in a forced manner which makes it clear that he loves to impose himself upon people not only in this manner, but also in manners far worse. “I am looking for a certain someone and I have difficulties in navigating this place.”

“I'll see if I can help you.” Atheleim does a semi-formal bow, a gesture the other man does not return, and in fact takes a cautious step back. “Who are you looking for?”

“A woman. Human woman. A bit taller than you are, which among men should be a rather distinctive feature. Has a scar across her left eye. And she carries a battleaxe.” When Atheleim does not answer immediately, he continues: “Very bad at stealth, resistant to blood magic. Light hair, rather long.”

Clearly he is thinking of Lyris Titanborn, even though some of the descriptions are rather

disturbing. A random person should not know all of these about her. Instead of indulging him, however, Atheleim addresses the nagging feeling he develops as the man speaks: “Pardon me, are you attempting to *charm* me?”

Lips are pursed in taken offence. “I am quite certain, General, that if I was charming you, you wouldn't know about it.”

“Very well, then, sir. Please, follow me.” He begins to walk back to the meeting room and finds himself hoping that perhaps at least one of those salmon rice rolls has been left and he could munch it.

Just as he turns the corner and his footsteps hasten as he sees the promised door, a thought barges into his brain with loud demands of attention and the door crashing behind it. “General?”

The man tilts folds his hands behind his back and tilts head to side with curiosity: “Is it not General?”

“I am not in the service of any military, and have never been,” Atheleim responds cautiously.

“Interesting. You bear a significant resemblance to General Varitalas-”

“Who's General Varitalas?” Lyris Titanborn announces her presence as she and Prophet Varen step through the door. Which is just as well, because Atheleim is right now going through a teeny weeny little shock and is not able to react to anything and anyone.

“Apparently not this gentleman,” the man smiles. Then his attention switches from Atheleim to the woman. “Lyris, wasn't it? You are peculiarly hard to find.”

“And you are?”

The next smile is rather ugly. No human mouth should have this many teeth. Or any teeth in this shape for that matter. “Ah, a mistake on my side. Of course you wouldn't recognize this form.”

The moments of transformation are rarely pretty, when the body is already no longer in one form but not yet in the other. The phase inbetween is terrifying, and this case is no exception.

It is not a Dremora, but it looks similar enough. More than the change of the form, Atheleim admires the magical subtlety of the change of the clothes as well.

“My name,” the person who is no longer a man, and who in fact hasn't been a man to start with, “is Zykkm-ahtro. We should talk.”

## Chapter End Notes

If you say you saw Atheleim being a Psijic coming, I want to see you backing up your claims. Because two weeks ago I personally had no idea he was a Psijic, that how good secret agent he is. And yes, his actual name is Varitalas, but he hasn't used it in forever and does not recognize it as his name now.

While Atheleim is important on accident, Zykkm-ahtro is important on purpose. What a lil' bitch.

# A Reason within Your Treason

## Chapter Summary

Lyris's new friend sees more of her than she would like him to.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

All things considered, the situation could be much worse. Lyris has enough experience with the Daedras for a lifetime or two. They don't want to talk to you often. If they do, they want to needle you and belittle you, break your spirit with harmful words and corrupt your determination and purpose.

“Not every Daedra,” Zykkm-ahtro crosses arms across his chest as he makes himself more comfortable in the chair, “but within those who come from the Neversong or Coldharbour you would have a hard time searching for an exception. Of course, in this particular case the exception found you.”

Lyris watches him with cautious eyes. He has a face she'd love to punch just to see what he is going to do about it, but she acknowledges that it might be wiser to hear out what he wants to say. She is glad for the considerable distance the desk of the table in the meeting room offers to them. Varen, Atheleim, and she are sitting on one side, Zykkm-ahtro on the other.

The Iddaroth has put on his punchable human face, because Lyris decided she cannot deal with this absolutely sober and ordered a mead, and if the servant bringing in her mead would see a Daedra sitting in the meeting room, it would cause only troubles and sorrow.

“Besides that, Zykkm-ahtro, you seem content in this form,” Lyris purses her lips.

“I would like to make a good use of it before it fully degrades,” the man shrugs nonchalantly.

“However, we are tap-dancing around the azure plasm, and as much as I would love to enjoy a lengthy conversation and the strange landscape of this Nirn, the time I can spend here before my absence from the Garden comes to an unwanted attention is limited.”

Varen rests his elbow on the table and steeples his fingers. “Then speak.”

“I don't recall addressing *you*. Sod off, mortal man, adults are talking.”

Lyris knows she shouldn't feel any pleasure from the Daedra talking to Varen in such manner. But for once being the important one and not the additional manpower in the room, well, it is a feeling you could bottle and sell for a great deal of money. It allows her to speak with more confidence:

“Lord Varen is right, even if you don't like it. Speak your mind, and speak it quickly. You might not look like a Daedra right now, but I am itching to sweep the floor with you.”

Zykkm-ahtro strops twirling the tip of his braid around his fingers: “We share a common goal: To drive Therisse from this world as quickly as possible, preferably before everyone's favourite Dragon of the Final End gets what he came here for.”

Lyris frowns in thoughts: “And what does Therisse want here?”

“An army? Power? The rest of the Triumvirate doesn't know, and I would love this whole ordeal to conclude before we get to find out, because in that moment it will most likely be late.” Zykkm-ahtro taps his fingers on the table. “I believe that we share this viewpoint.”

A long considering look. Then Lyris asks: “Who are you working for? Whose side are you on? Ours? That doesn't seem likely.”

The Daedra chuckles in response. “No, no, I am certainly not on *your* side, whatever your side might be. But our sides are facing in the same direction for the time being. My side is the Triumvirate, the three most powerful Daedric Princes in Oblivion. What Therisse has done is betrayal to the other two and must be put to an end.”

“And here it seemed that you work for Molag Bal,” Atheleim mutters, head in hands. He has helped himself to his sketchbook and case of pencils, and is now nervously doodling. When Lyris looks to her side, she notices he has covered several papers with a disturbing amount of coiling tentacles and teeth.

“The Lord of Domination is a part of the Triumvirate, and his realm is the most accepting for Iddaroths. I usually reside in Coldharbour and therefore carry out Molag Bal's bidding more often than for the other Princes.”

Lyris feels a headache crawling up her temples. She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Alright then. Where did you all crawl out from? I sure as hell have never heard of Therisse or this Triumvirate, and I have to admit I don't like not understanding in what is going on in here.”

Zykkm-ahtro glances at the ceiling and his lips move without any words coming out loud. When he makes up his mind, he speaks in a slightly condescending tone: “Very well, I'll do my best to explain to you. Have you heard of a mer named Vanus Galerion? No judgement if you did not, it is entirely possible that he hadn't even been born here.”

“Literally everyone has heard of Vanus bloody Galerion,” Atheleim stabs his current sketch and pulls a rather sour face.

“Oh, right,” Lyris nods, “you are from the Mages' guild, aren't you?” Atheleim hums as a way of replying, but already her attention is fully on the Daedra. “Go on.”

“Where I come from, Galerion had once expressed his theory of multiverse, according to which your entire world – the Nirn and the Oblivion, all of Mundus, every place you know of – could be approximated to one room in which you live. That is simple enough to imagine, I suppose?” When Varen, Atheleim and Lyris all nod that yes, it is clear enough, he continues: “Of course, the door is locked, but you have no reason to leave the room, since everything is in it. But if you were able to leave the room, you'd find yourself in a grand mansion – and this bit here is important – full of doors leading to *other* rooms. And in those rooms are yet again entire worlds, like yours, but a bit different.”

Varen and Lyris need to digest that information for a moment, while Atheleim doesn't seem to be bothered. He's probably heard this theory million times.

“In Galerion's approximation, adjacent rooms differ only slightly in their contents, sometimes seemingly the same to an untrained eye. From this perspective, while the room this world is in is situated on the ground floor, the world I come from is up three flights of stairs.” Zykkm-ahtro claps his hands. “I don't expect this to answer the entirety of your question, but we could sit here until the stars bleed out and I still wouldn't have told you all there is to tell.”

Lyris finds herself wondering what Zykkm-ahtro's version of Tamriel is like, but upon realizing that the Mantis are probably a common occurrence there, she figures out she is in no hurry finding out the answer. "So you want to wrap this over and sod off back home to tormenting people or whatever it is you do, and the fastest way to do this is working with us, do I read you right?"

"You do. And unless I have terribly misunderstood your intentions, you want all of this to come to an end and send us packing all back to where we have come out from, and the quickest means of accomplishing this is to cooperate with me and my unit."

Somebody at the door drops a metallic object which makes a loud noise when it meets the floor. Lyris turns to her left to see Sai, who has just manage to shut his mouth close again and is now bending over and picking up his spoon.

Varen, without even turning to Sai, makes a very specific gesture which over the time in the Harbourage the Companions learned to associate with the word "Daedra." That is most probably why out loud Sai only says: "Don't mind me, the spoon is just heavy." However, his face and circular waving with the aforementioned spoon are saying: "I'll get Tharn." Lyris snorts; what does it say about their little group that they have an expression for getting Tharn?

Sai Sahan shuffles out of the room without another word.

Zykkm-ahtro watches the whole exchange with his eyebrows ostentatiously risen, and once the muscular warrior leaves from sight, he says: "Why you have decided to surround yourself with such a company us completely lost on me. Oh well, I suppose I'll have to do the best out of this situation. Like always."

"Says the Daedra who's pacting with that skeever Mannimarco," Lyris growls right back at him. At hearing that name, Varen flinches as if she just stabbed him. In an attempt to reassure him, she takes his hand and gently squeezes it. He squeezes back.

The Iddaroth lets out a long suffered sigh. "Believe me that his company was not my choice. While that Psijic renegade is very useful and effective in his methods, his loyalty is in many ways lacking. His plan to betray his master – he serves only Molag Bal, not the entire Triumvirate – is a publicly known secret in every corner of Oblivion. Ironically, the Hulmer himself is not aware of how obvious he just is." He chuckles and adds: "I've made attempts to start a betting pool on when his inevitable betrayal is going to take place, but unfortunately the Daedras don't understand the point of bets. Or the point of currency. Many points they do not understand."

"Is that to imply you are not a Daedra?" Varen rubs his unseeing eyes. There is a stretched moment of awkwardness, because he is not dignified with a response.

After a moment, Zykkm-ahtro rises from the chair. "Well, I am glad we have reached this agreement. Expect further contact when I have anything more concrete to offer. Oh, and so I wouldn't forget..." He reaches into a concealed compartment in his gauntlet and pulls out a coin-sized pendant with a hole in the middle, hanging from a leather lace. "I took the initiative and retrieved this trinket for you. A highly impractical mean of communication, especially if the recipient cannot turn it of at will, wouldn't you agree?"

Lyris can swear he has just winked at her, but she is too busy catching the thrown Seer's Eye to punch that son of a bitch in face as he rightly deserves. When she looks at him again, he is no longer there – only the fading orange light in the air hints that he has used this distraction to open a portal and hightailed it.

After a long silent moment Atheleim looks up from his drawing: "I think he likes you. That, or he

loves to listen to his own voice. I cannot explain his willingness to explain this many things to you otherwise.”

“Badmouthing me behind my back?” Tharn asks from behind Sai as the two of them enter the room. His expression changes from amused to puzzled when Varen starts snickering. He demands an explanation: “What?”

“We weren't talking about you in the slightest,” Lyris grumbles. “Magister Atheleim was talking about that Daedra who has *just left*. You're late, by the way.”

Two more days come to pass, at the end of which Lyris is called to Stitches to protect the peculiarly built town. That's where she learns some of the Mantis are capable of such dirty tricks as magic or turning invisible, not to mention flying, and splitting into smaller chitinous bitches.

She returns to Rimmen along with Sai and Prefect Calo early in the morning, sharing old jokes about burning bridges which have been made way too many times to be still funny. But when you burn literal bridges, you deserve to jest about that matter to digest the horrible impact of everything that came to pass.

A mindful servant comes to take her armour and battleaxe for cleaning and necessary maintenance – “Could you get me a new pauldron? I have lost the left one. Thank you, you are a darling.” – so Lyris is free to head to the bathroom and indulge herself with a ridiculous amount of hot water.

“Tiring day?”

Lyris does not yelp or scream or panic. In the situations of surprise fear, her reaction is to fight, not to flight. She turns around without thinking about it, and hurls the bar of milky soap at the intruder, even before she knows she is doing.

One thing has to be said about Zykkm-ahtro's reflexes: They are fast enough for him to catch the make-shift projectile in his clawed hand.

“What in Oblivion are you doing in the bathroom? Have you heard of privacy?” she hisses at him.

He smiles and morphs into his human form, casually putting the soap on the edge of the bath. “In the order of your questions: I am talking to you in the absence of your vexing companions, and yes, I have heard of that human concept.”

She glares at him.

“Oh, don't be like that, Lyris. Do you mind if I call you Lyris?” He doesn't let her to tell him that yes, she very much minds that familiarity with which he is treating her, and continues: “While the psychological advantage of finding you completely undressed is welcomed on my side, I have not done it on purpose.”

“You could also use a bath, you know,” she grumbles at him. It is true – he has soot over his face, and the armour he is wearing is quite battered. “I suppose you have been busy”

“Is that an invitation, Lyris?”

“No. Stay the hell out of the water unless you want me to rip your spine out and tie a knot on it. We are nowhere near friendly enough for me to want you anywhere near my bath, let alone *in* it.”

"I am not your immediate enemy," he replies calmly, "that is as friendly as you can get with a Daedra. By the bleeding sky, this room is hot." He unclasps his red cloak and neatly folded he puts it aside, like his gauntlets and cuirass. Wearing just the high boots, worn tunic and breeches, of both which bears signs of heavy mending from cuts and scorching, he looks more human than before. He is not bad looking. Not Lyris's type, he still has a face she dreams of punching, but she knows enough of both men and women who'd be charmed by his look. And when he isn't being a complete ass, his talk can be alluring.

"Well," she rests her elbows on the edge of the bath once the Daedra sits down and their eyes are on the same level, "what do I owe for this not hostile visit if you haven't come to see me naked in water, then?"

"Mannimarco has finally sold the Tribunal out to Therisse. A stupid decision, but one he's made nonetheless."

Lyris lets that information toll around her head. "I like to hear that," she concludes. "It means I get to deck him."

"Looking on the positive side of the situation. I like that approach."

"This world has a lot of people who'd like to bash Mannimarco's head against the wall. Take a number and line up in the queue."

"Indulge me, what is so terrible that he has done to you all?"

"Hmm..." Lyris scratches her chin. "I'll tell you, but not for free. If you answer my questions, I'll answer yours."

"An answer for an answer. That sound far to me." The agreement comes without any reluctance. "But I asked first, so you answer first."

She takes a deep breath and tries to distance herself from her thoughts. Without much success.

"That bastard of a corpse herder betrayed the Emperor to Molag Bal, caused all manners of suffering thorough Tamriel, and finally tried to enslave thousands of souls to become a god. He almost managed it."

"I take it that's how you got those scars around your wrists." When Lyris frowns at him, he only chuckles: "Don't give me this look. I have spent enough time around the God of Brutality to know that you can remove a soul from Coldharbour, but never you can truly leave the plane of suffering behind. It is to be carried within you forever, try as you might. It will weight you down for all of eternity, in life, in death and beyond it."

"Speaking from experience, are you?"

"Is that your question?" He tilts his head to side with curiosity.

"No," she shakes her head, her wet hair sticking to her face. She brushes it aside. "I want to know what your name means."

"That's it? Bah. It is an untranslatable word pun, that is all-"

"I know *that*," she doesn't let him finish. "Believe it or not, in Nirn there are people who known Daedric enough to get that far. Explain that name to me."

"Hmph." He pauses. Sighs, even. He picks up his gauntlets and begins to put them on, as though



he is not prepared to say the following words without wearing means of physical protection: “Oh, very well, since I agreed to this. *Ahtro* means *grown sharpness*, while *zykkm* would be translated as *trap of blood*. Daedric lacks definite terms like most of the languages descending from the Ehlnofex.” Zykkm-ahtro crosses his arms. “In the context that my transformation undertook place within the Gardens of Treason, the most approximate yet meaningful translation of my name would be *amber-thorn*, which references both the work of the Impalers as my old name. Satisfied with the answer?”

“No. But I didn't expect to be.” Lyris shrugs. She has found out that when the Daedra is talking for a longer period of time without an interruption, his voice grows smoother and soothing, which combined with the hot bath and finally acknowledge exhaustion from the day-long ride and fight is lulling her to sloop. She has her chin rested on the edge of the bath, eyes closed.

The a thought which has been knocking on the door of her mind for some time, finally manages to break in through a window and she rises in alert: “Wait, what do you mean by your transformation?”

But she is already talking to an empty room. All that Zykkm-ahtro has left behind is the battered red cloak.

She pushes away her frustration, finishes her bath, and once she gathers up all her clothes and the cloak, and gets dressed again in her room, she heads to inform the rest of the Company about the newest update on everyone's most hated elf in existence. Needless to say that nobody is pleased to hear the news.

A polite cough draws her attention to the balcony. The sun has just disappeared beyond the horizon, but the sky is still a vibrant shade of red to the west.

“Today you haven't appeared behind me, and even let me to be decent,” Lyris notes when she realizes it is Zykkm-ahtro who has cleared his throat.

“Hello, Lyris. Believe it or not, I am not extremely fond of having cosmetics thrown at me at high velocity.” He isn't making any move towards her and she doesn't want to holler at him across the hallway, so she joins him on the balcony.

“Been enjoying the view? The sunset had to be beautiful.”

He frowns in the direction of the disappearing light. “I am not exactly fond of that ugly shining bitch. How you are willing to slave your life away underneath its light is utterly beyond me. Your world is a nightmare.”

“Does not your version of Tamriel have a sun?”

Zykkm-ahtro smiles, showing his teeth seemingly consisting entirely of canines: “Is that a question, Lyris?”

“Sure,” she shrugs, not seeing any way it could play into the Daedra's advantage, “that's my question. Is there a sun on the Tamriel you come from?”

“No. There used to be, eras ago, but that time is long gone. Therisse bled it out to regain his power and take a seat among the Daedric Princes. And therefore... there is no sun over Tamriel.” He sighs heavily. “Funny, isn't it?”

Lyris fails to see anything besides utterly depressing in the matter. “What is?”

“For years and years I have read in ancient texts what the Light Era was like, colourful and bright, with trees and flowers and little fluffy animals. I dreamed of it, even, felt nostalgia for a time long gone by before I was even born. And then I come here, your world which has all of that I once upon a time wished for, and I *absolutely hate* it, detest it with every fibre of my being.” He kicks a potted plant which by no mean deserved it, and adds: “In a way I envy the Mantis.”

“Why?”

“They are blind and covered in chitinous carapace. The light of this world does not irk them, the heat of the sun does not burn their bodies to the bone.”

“If they are blind,” Lyris starts carefully, “why do they have eyes?”

“Do I look like an entomologist to you?”

“Since I haven't got a clue what the shit of a word is supposed to mean, I don't see a reason why you couldn't be.”

For a moment Zykkm-ahtro stares at her as though she has sprouted horns on her head – From this close, Lyris realizes that might not seem all unlikely to the Daedra, as there she has just noticed two little horns growing from among his hair, although they are still only small nubs at this point, barely visible in the dark of the evening – and then he bursts out into a laughter, and the laughter later changes into a horrible case of a hiccup. “Alright,” he says once his breath has calmed down enough, “it is my turn to ask now.”

“Oh dear. Shoot it, Ember-thorn.”

“Why do you keep fighting?”

Now it is Lyris's turn to stare in disbelief, all the more as Zykkm-ahtro's question seems genuine. She scrambles around her head for words, and after a couple of failed attempts she manages to blurt out: “How could I *not*? ”

“The end is inevitable. The pain unbearable. Why to even bother going on, why keep on fighting for a world which will never even be grateful for all you do for it? It doesn't serve a purpose. All you do is in vain.”

She looks him all over. The battered armour, the scar across his chin which is mostly hidden by the goatee, the face which is too human for a Daedra and not human enough for a mortal. How can she answer to him? In the end, she just shrugs: “Well, sure, with this attitude...”

For a long while there is silence. It is not entirely an uncomfortable one. As friendly as one can get with a Daedra indeed. But there is only so much of it Lyris can bear, because she doesn't want to get chummy with a Daedra, not even one which is very human-like in both appearance and and behaviour, and this is dangerously close to the line she has drawn.

“By the way, by any chance, you haven't come to pick up your cloak, have you?”

“Oh, you still have it?”

“I figured out I might barter it for something. That's a thing you Daedras do, don't you?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes,” Zykkm-ahtro nods. The night has already settled in and it is now

drawing long and deep shadows in his face, making his unnaturally blue eyes seemingly glowing. “Have you anything specific you'd want to trade in for, or do I auction on it blindly?”

Lyriss hasn't got anything specific in mind. “What are you willing to offer?”

“This.” From the depths of his armour he produces a bracelet; four small red gems of irregular shapes linked together by a silver chain. He holds it out to her so she can inspect it in the light provided by the waxing moons.

“Are you offering a jewel? That's what you know about women, that we are supposed to like jewels and vanity?” Her brow furrows as she takes the bracelet in hand. It has to be one of the simplest and shoddily done pieces of decoration she has ever seen, even the gemstones, possibly rubies, aren't cut in any specific shape; why, they seem like shards rather than gemstones.

Zykkm-ahtro shrugs. “I know you to be a warrior, I don't think jewellery would be of your interest. But the fact that the red diamonds are supposedly to be shards of a drop of Therisse's crystallized blood could be of your interest.” When he notices Lyriss's surprise, he continues: “They come from an artefact supposedly created by Therisse long ago, before he devoured the sun and became a Daedra. The rest of the Divines chose a champion among the mortals at the end of the Dusk Era, the Nightrbringer of legends, who claimed and destroyed the original powerful amulet on Nirn, banishing in the process the mad god into Oblivion, draining him of his power. These four gems are one of the few that have been found. They still hold fragments of Therisse's power of what it was before he became, well, Therisse.”

“And you are giving this up for a cloak that holds together on a prayer?” Is that a cloak of invisibility of something? Should she hold onto it with her teeth and life?

“The cloak has only sentimental value for me. But as it is, I have been embraced by Therisse, since I am an Iddaroth, and as such I cannot utilize the power within these fragments. A power flowing through me is accessible to the Mother of Monsters, and I don't want him to harvest his original power, as that would be the demise of the Triumvirate. You, on the other hand, you could use them for a purpose, such as banishing Therisse from this realm. And besides,” and here Zykkm-ahtro grins, “red is your colour.”

Lyriss mulls that information through her brain. She settles on a decision: “Fine. Get your cloak, then. I'll make a good use of this.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” He stands up and heads to the door. Suddenly he stops and turns around. “And Lyriss, one more thing, probably of the greatest importance, so I am telling it to you as the last, so you would not forget it: This is in a while going to be the last time we speak together face to face. Mannimarco has spread his powers. While the army of Therisse grows – the Mantis hatch and the Mother of Monsters gains new children of Iddaroths from your world – the number of Daedras which are to my command grows not. I know that the renegade is going to make moves against the valley of Nibenay, the east of the Rift, and Rimmren. Here he finds the greatest source of resistance, but whatever he is looking for in those two places, I must not let him find it. As such... I leave the defence of this place in your hand. Neither of us can afford to fail.”

With that he leaves, possibly to gather his cloak from Lyriss's room, leaving her alone and in silence. She is clutching the bracelet to her chest without even knowing it.

She doesn't know for how long she's been sitting there, lost in wordless thoughts of vague shape, gazing at the waxing moons in the sky, before something besides her moves and Sai, Vare, and Tharn sit down next to her on the bench.

“A new bracelet?” Sai notices.

“Believe it or not, I've got it from our tamed Daedra,” Lyris mutters.

Varen chuckles: “Men have a strange habit to gift you with trinkets.”

“Well, it at least matches with the brooch the Silvenar has given to me,” Lyris nods. But yes, it is a strange habit.

“At least you have been given something that hasn't got a purpose, instead of a purpose you are never intending to use,” Tharn spits out. “I have nothing forgotten that I would love to remember; what am I supposed to do with a memory sting?”

“Oh, you complain. He gave me a shaving mirror.” By the tone, even a week later Sai still not sure whether he is supposed to be amused or offended by the gift.

“What, do you want to change?”

The two of them exchange a long look. Then Sai concludes: “Sure, Tharn. You'll at least make a use of it. And I might at least remember where I lost my good sense of not talking to you,”

“Aren't you two supposed to be adults?” Varen sighs, but it is clear he doesn't mean it. Lyris has to admit that this is far more acceptable than Sai's unreadablesilence and Tharn's constant needling.

The four of them are finally coming along. That's an unmistakeable sign of the world ending. Again.

## Chapter End Notes

I have a very elaborate Therisse!Tamriel AU and I can't share it with you because godsdamned spoilers for this fic.

Anyway, have you got any theories about, say Zykkm-ahtro? Or Therisse? Or literally anything? Share them with me. I want to hear your theories and discuss them. (I also want to talk about the Kalmer bleeding the stars for power. Oh wait, I haven't mentioned the Kalmer yet, have I?)

# That Son of a Horker

## Chapter Summary

Mannimarco attacks Rimmen.

## Chapter Notes

Have I mentioned that I hate writing fight scenes? I hate writing fight scenes.

Anyway, this chapter is shorter, because there are only so many ways I can write "[Person] cuts [enemy] in half" without it getting boring and repetitive, and I have used all of them twice. It's a hardcore and epic battle which would look damn good in a movie (maybe not, it'd be chaotic), but in text it sorts of, you know, loses the appeal.

The easiest part of the next morning is explaining to Tharn that no, he is not going to inspect Lyris's new Very Ugly Bracelet of Power, based on the ground that the last time he tinkered with a divine artefact connected to the power of a dragon god, it didn't kill him only because he got a big explosion right into his face. Since Tharn has been mere moments before that instructed that he needs to water his new shaving mirror from time to time, as it made of a living tree, his head refuses to bother with being roasted like a chicken, and he just rolls his eyes and leaves the breakfast table.

The harder bit is to find Atheleim who has mysteriously disappeared from his room and hasn't come to the breakfast at all. Gadris, Zur, Lyris and Khunzar-ri have formed a little group and are now searching for him. Zur, being the most practical of the four of them, has taken a bowl of cream-balls for the way, just so he can keep snacking between the meals. Gadris's thoughts on that are unknown, as the Dunmer is too well behaved to speak with a full mouth.

Lyris has just rounded the corner when something hits her with a force great enough to send her stumbling backwards, landing quite unceremoniously not on her but but on Khuzar-ri's chest. "Oof!" she manages eloquently.

"Gnh!" is Atheleim's answer as he picks himself up from the floor where the impact has thrown him. He still has bed hair and is wearing only breeches, which means that once he gets up and frantically shakes Lyris's shoulders, she feels like a loaf bread sandwiched between two flanks of pure beef.

"Alright, alright, what about you tell us what is going on, and maybe pick up your paintbrushes, too?" Gadris and Zur ask. As they have ran out of the cream-balls, they are now free to speak as they wish.

"Nhhh! We need to- To- Evacuate. The people! Evacuate the city!"

Lyris pushes him a bit away, as she doesn't like being shaken. "Slow down, mage boy wonder. What is going on?"

The Altmer unrolls the large paper he has been holding so tightly that he crumpled it in the middle. When unfolded a quite good skyline of Rimmen against the orange-and-pink morning sky is bared to the world. The hasty sketch is painted over with watercolours, but the artwork is not finished. “We need to,” Atheleim stabs the paper with his finger, “evacuate the people from the city. *Now*.”

Gadris and Lyris exchange looks, neither of them can make a sense and reason of what the Altmer is saying, but Khunzar-ri nods: “Zar sees. He will inform the blood of Anequina at once. Do you know what harm comes Rimmen's way?”

“No,” Atheleim shakes his head. “Only that it does.”

Lyris doesn't know why Khunzar-ri is treating Atheleim's doomsaying seriously, but if he does, he has to have a good reason. Something in her head goes *click* and she blurts out: “Mannimarco.”

“What?” Everyone turns to her.

“Zykkm-ahtro said yesterday that that bastard will attack Rimmen, because it is a point of resistance. He's coming. You,” she points to the boys, “warn Queen Khamira, organize the evacuation. I'll rally up the army.”

“Yessir,” the Mages comply immediately and scatter to do their task.

Khunzar-ri lingers with a smile of a tiger on his lips, not like with his face he could do any other smile. “You are a woman of action, Lyris-do. You remind this one of Flinthild.”

“That not that much of a compliment you think it to be, big guy,” Lyris snaps at him, because she doesn't want to spend the next three hours being lectured who or what this Flinthild is or was, not to mention that she still has this feeling that whenever any of the Khajiit call her Lyris-do, they are laughing at her in her face without her knowing why she is the butt of the joke. “Now, haven't I given you a job to do? Stop standing there like a frost troll froze your balls off.”

The legendary hero bows to her, and scampers off to warn Khamira. Lyris turns the other way around to get either Calo, Sai, or Tharn. Or Zamarak, but Zamarak is most likely with Khamira, while of the other three at least one is bound to be in the library. Nerds. All three of them.

Rimmen is empty by the time the horizon darkens with swarming insect monsters. Or mostly empty, since the army consisting of the regular soldiers, the Irregulars, and the Claws, still remains in the city, weapons at ready.

Prefect Calo is organizing his men outside. A few of the soldiers are left in the palace, but already the fights are breaking out in the streets of Rimmen as the Mantis land from the sky and various Daedras appear out of the portals. Whatever preparations are left to be done are quickly hastened, but it is clear they are not going to be done fast enough for everyone to be ready.

Atheleim along with Zur and Gadris have been last seen standing on the city walls, preparing spells of mass destruction to throw at the hordes of enemies.

Within the palace, there are complaints. That Queen Khamira is staying has been settled early on when she punched everyone who suggested otherwise in the nose. Which is namely only Khunzar-ri, because Sai, Varen, and Lyris decided it is not their problem to deal with, and Zamarak and Calo know her long enough to even entertain the thought of making her leave any potential battlefield. Tharn has been at the moment too occupied with fighting for his own rights to remain to give a damn about what Khamira is going to do.

The reasons for Tharn to leave are sound and logical and he is not listening to any of them. His final argument is this: "Mage is only one half of the battlemage. The other half is the battle, and I have more than enough of that left in me." Then the Mantis begin to pour in and he sets the first three of them on fire, so Varen and Lyris figure that hopefully he knows what he is doing.

Lyris finds herself fighting back to back with Zamarak who has this incredible capability of knocking the enemies to the ground where Lyris's battleaxe can turn them into minced meat regardless of armour. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Varen throwing around trapping spells which don't require precise aim, as something is bound to step into them.

The worst part of it is the fact that they aren't facing only the Mantis. She has seen enough of the dro-m'Ahtro not to be afraid of them, however, there are Daedra of humanoid shape which are wearing the same curved horns as Zykkm-ahtro does – some of them look bestial, some of them resemble elves drained of all colours, some of them look like men who have lost all of their sanity. Iddaroths, Lyris realizes. Mortals who were turned into Daedras.

Magic fizzles through the air, the stench of burned flesh makes breathing difficult. The enemy seems to come without an end. Lyris knows she is to become exhausted at some point and tries to conserve her energy, becoming more defensive. A new tide of Iddaroths who hurl around soul-tearing spells while swinging swords around separates her from Zamarak – Lyris is forced to retreat to the throne room, while Zamarak stays along with the Queen in the corridors.

She has just enough time to notice the Iddaroths are all wearing old and battered Imperial uniforms, even though the red is faded and the silver blackened by time, but then she is too busy deflecting the blows to notice anything else. Still, the observation gives her an advantage: Lyris is familiar with the way the Imperial spellblades fight, and that allows her to adjust her defence and foresee the actions of her current adversaries. Which is good, as the throne room is filled with a veil of smoke which makes it not only hard to breathe, but almost impossible to see. The room is also impossibly hot, like a forge or...

Or like a dragonfire! There she notices Tharn. He rolls on the ground and lands at her feet. She extends one hand to help him up, while her axe catches a sudden bolt of lightning. The man has somehow gotten his hand on a spear, although he uses it more like a staff and less like a spear, twirling it and hitting the nearby enemies with the blunt end and sending them off balance.

If she hadn't seen Tharn in combat before, she would say he isn't missing the ability to cast spells. The drive with which he brings the enemies down is admirable, especially when she considers his age. Not that she has time to realize all of that into much detail.

It reminds her of the battle at Riverhold, where he blew fire around, turning the sand into glass and burning everything he touched – the same fire is literally burning in his eyes and under his skin, it comes out in cracks and his bloody damn armour is red-hot.

He doesn't stick around her and as soon as he gets a clearing, he runs for the throne with an uncharacteristic zeal. She gets to see why soon enough when a magically caused gust of cold wind, along with some sharp ice shards, clear the air for her to see white hair and glowing eyes of evil and insanity: Mannimarco.

This one is far more similar to the necromancer Lyris remembers rather than what she saw in the Tangle. The shadows in his face are sharp enough to induce pure terror, the hunched tense posture suggest he is not entirely in control of himself. The lack of any colour besides the ice-cold blue glow that runs across his skin and the thorns coming out of his spine, however, those are new. Or perhaps they have always been there, underneath,

The necromancer – Or wait, this version of Mannimarco is not a necromancer, is he? – extends his hand and a force wave, which nearly sweeps Lyris of her feet, throws Tharn across the room and into the wall, pushing back the ball of fire he has conjured and making it explode in the middle of the room in vain.

A bolt of what seems to be black fire is what the treacherous elf hits Tharn with next. An another and another, and then something which Lyris identifies as a blood-bolt, and Tharn screams out in pain, and after that he stops moving.

Lyris tries to cleave her way through the swarming Mantis piercers and their bulky shield-like brothers, she has to get Tharn out of there, but before she manages it, another spell lifts the battlemage from the ground and throws him against the ceiling with brutal force. At least he grunts, so he isn't dead, which is good to know.

She doubles her efforts in freeing herself from the swarm, the powerful swings sending pieces of chitin flying and the disgusting foul hemolymph spraying the room and turning the floor slick and sticky. If she is to turn the tide, she has to stop Mannimarco.

It takes her long to reach him, at least it seems like forever. The first swing she takes at him strikes him into the back, but the armour he is wearing must be reinforced with some sort of strong spell, because it only makes him stumble a few steps forwards, instead of cutting him in half.

The second swing he dodges.

She doesn't manage to get a third try, because someone to her left takes it instead of her with a scream of pure rage. That's Sai. His blade gives a nasty cut to Mannimarco's thigh, blood as white as milk begins to pour out.

The mer speaks words which Lyris wouldn't be able to repeat even if she tried, her teeth, tongue and the entirety of her throat lack the proper features to make such sounds. The force-wave throws both her and Sai backwards, leaving them both gasping for air which doesn't come.

“You,” Mannimarco hisses at Lyris, his voice deformed as though he was speaking from very far away and through a metal tube. A dagger appears in his hand, it's blade black and mostly hollow. “You are the Great Traitor's pet. Well, this has been the last time he has opposed me.” He rises the dark blade and lunges forward.

Lyris cannot move away, as much as she tries, her limbs simply refuse to cooperate. She braces for the pain.

The pain doesn't come, as the dagger hits a sudden wall of light. The magical shield flickers and then vanishes, but already Mannimarco turns around to see who cast the spell.

Whatever magic has been preventing Lyris from moving dissolves, but at the same time the exhaustion of the fight makes itself known to her. She at least manages to sit up, and with a groan Sai besides her does the same.

She spots Tharn. He is still at the same place he has been dropped off, but he is on his knees, trembling, a streak of blood running down from his nose. His eyes glow and his lips form around words of magic, both mortal and daedric alike. Weakly he is making it to his feet, all Mantis that try to stop him burning to crisp the moment they get too close to him.

The first ray of red light hits Mannimarco squarely in face. He tries to counter the next spell, but Lyris takes the opportunity and his ugly head by the ears and yanks it sideways with an ugly crack



– she has just broken his neck. It doesn't seem to set him back by much, but it is enough that whatever he has been trying to do fizzles away like a cloud of released swamp gas and Tharn's simple bolt of lightning paralyzes that bastard for a moment.

Sai has lost his sword, but his hands find the sharp end of a broken Iddaroth halberd, and uses the opening moment to behead the elf. He is even fast enough to catch Tharn as he falls forward; whatever drive he has been using to push himself this far, he has reached the end of it.

Mannimarco is probably going to be back from dead the next week, but right now he is not a problem anymore, which is a great improvement of the situation.

“For someone who couldn't do a magelight yesterday, you've done great improvements,” Lyris cheers up at him. “Looks like you've found your bar of soap, eh?” Her battleaxe sends one more Iddaroth to the Oblivion.

“Give me the congratulations later,” Tharn mutters and points at the windows. The moment Lyris does, one of them shatters and lets in a gargantuan monster buzzing with hatred – a Mantis swarm-mother, accompanied by at least three dozens of piercers and those spell-casting uglinesses.

“You aren't going to blow this one up, are you?” Lyris asks, afraid of what the answer could be. At Riverhold the litres of boiling hemolymph warmed up by dragonfire nearly killed them both, and they had a place to cover. Here there is nothing like that.

“No,” Tharn gives her a wide smile, which means that whatever he is planning to do, it is going to be even worse than what she has in mind. “If I ignite any more dragonfire, it'll burn me to bone. I think I'm going to pass-” he doesn't finish, but his meaning is clear. His eyes roll back and he loses consciousness.

Lyris and Sai don't even look at each other, they don't even share a nod – Lyris throws the battlemage on her back and the two of them run for the main hall, the place they have last seen Khamira, Zamarak, and Khunzar-ri.

Along the way they pick up Varen, who is far from being overwhelmed, but the number of gashes across his arms and chest aren't exactly improving his dishevelled looks.

“Lord Varen, do you think you could-” Sai starts, but he isn't let to finish his sentence, as an especially large and ugly Mantis tries to bite his head off. Lyris kicks it in the crotch, which would be more effective if it was not an insect, but it saves Sai's neck, literally.

She throws Tharn's body at Varen with the words: “You know healing. Wake him up!”

“Easier said than done,” the Prophet murmurs, “he is completely drained.” Nevertheless the soft glow of healing magic streams from his hands and embraces Tharn's body.

“Khamira is down there,” Sai notices when he casts a gutted out Iddaroth over the railings of the staircase. “She is alone and not going to hold out long.”

“You stay with these two,” Lyris says, “I'll protect the queen.”

Sai nods and just as Lyris passes him, he kisses her on cheek. She is glad she is covered in grime and ash and blood, because it means he can't see her blushing.

She almost doesn't make it to Khamira in one piece, because on the stairs she trips over an innocently waddling bantam guar.



# Interlude: Gardening Made Easy, Coldharbour Edition (by Sir C. of C.)

## Chapter Summary

That chapter starring the most heroic and brave Sir Cadwell of Codswallop and Chorrol

## Chapter Notes

So, exams are finishing this week for me, yay. At least officially. And also I wrote two chapters of The Many Deaths Of Me, which if you have a lot of contradicting feelings about the current writing take on World of Warcraft is something you might want to read #ShamelessSelfPromotion  
And Cadwell and Minsc of Baldur's Gade should meet.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The day is exceptionally lovely. All days in Coldharbour are lovely, of course except those which aren't, but this one is extremely lovely. The wind sings amidst the jagged cliffs a cheerful song of death and violence, the clannerfangs chirp happily as they pick clear the bones of the unfortunate fellows who couldn't help themselves to run fast enough.

Cadwell is tuning his lute as he is trying to make himself more comfortable on his humble bed. Already he has found just the right spot where some sharp stone underneath the sleeping mat is stabbing him below the shoulder right into that kink he has developed yesterday, easing it away, but the only problem is that there is no place to put his legs now. Things would be easier if he could put his legs away and then on again, much like whole shoes. Or maybe if he preps them up the wall like *this*... Yeah, this might just work.

*Aren't you the depiction of leisure.*

“Excuse you, Honour, and what is that supposed to mean?” He turns his head to side to look at his trusted steed. Honour is not a bad companion for all eternity, but she gets to be a mouthful sometimes. Or maybe it's a he, Cadwell is not entirely sure how to tell boy-lizards and girl-lizards apart, so he uses all pronouns that come to his mind when speaking about Honour, confident that if Honour minded any of them being used related to her own being, she would immediately correct him. But most of the time he speaks of Honour as about a her, the same way sailors speak about their ships as a her.

*Here you are, performing auditory arts for no other reason than your own amusement while your friends fight for their life and for the future of their world, escaping tremendous death by the skin of their teeth every moment. They require great luck to keep pushing on every day and every moment, while their adversaries need to be lucky only once.* Honour clucks and tries to swallow a pebble, but upon finding out it is not very tasty, she spits it out again.

The knight sits up abruptly and hits his head on the roof. “Are you, per chance, insinuating I am a coward?”

*Do I truly need to insinuate?* The mighty steed walks gracefully over to the dead campfire, and makes herself a comfortable seat in the cold ashes. It has been some time since Cadwell has lit it – he doesn't mind the chill, it is soothing for his throbbing head, so he only uses it for cooking. Lately, however, the mere thought of food makes his stomach turn and skin crawl, and had he have a soul, it would be wailing about entertaining such thoughts.

“I am absolutely content they are doing just swell without me,” Cadwell waves his hand. “They don't need me, they've saved Tamriel many times when I wasn't there. And I can't be a proper knight if I have a tattle of questlings tailing me, can I?”

Honour simply tilts her head to side, making it clear that this argument is nothing she wishes to continue. Cadwell knows that it does not mean she has given up arguing her point, she is just rolling her eyes at him and deems him too unreasonable to talk to. She does that when she is disappointed with him. Disappointed Honour makes for a terrible companion, which would explain why they were not getting along in the past few days at all.

He decides that a little walk will do him good, and also bring him away from his irritated and disappointed steed, which will break some tension. So he gets up and walks in a random direction. That is a great thing about Coldharbour: You can walk for hours, days even, without actually getting anywhere. There is no other place to take a relaxing walk to be alone with your thoughts like Coldharbour.

He finds himself in the Gardens of Treason. It is one of the few places in Coldharbour that has some actual greenery, although what this particular greenery is, that is better not to inquire about. And like all beauty, even this one has thorns – long and thin and needle-like, dripping with some an exquisite tonic of some sort which heightens senses. Now, the Daedras simply wrap people in the tangled vines of these delicate flowers, because they seriously lack imagination. If your sleight of hand is good enough and you don't mind the occasional pinch of not-really-amber under your thumb, you can collect this tonic in a bottle or a casserole or a helmet and give yourself an excellent evening, seeing all things unseen and feeling every piece of gravel under your shoes. Besides, the scenery here is absolutely breath-taking. The Impalers, as the local gardeners are call, because old sport Molag Bal has to be very extra all the time, have a real green thumb. It's on display in the centre of the Gardens, along with the rest of the hand! It is truly a must-see for anyone who wanders by.

Cadwell, however, has seen the monument many times, and so instead he decides to climb on the top of one of the garden sheds where the Impalers keep all their gardening implements such as rakes, spears – that one has a very dirty joke to it, but only within the Daedric jargon of Coldharbour – bottles of liquid cold-fire, ladders, spare organs, helpers, fertilizers, clannerfang treats, shovels, and the like. Cadwell's never been one for gardening, so he did not understand the purpose of everything that was to be found there, and he did not bother himself with it, because what would he use such a knowledge for? Anyway, that is not the point. The point is that to make them a most effective storage, the sheds are rather tall spires, from which there is an amazing view. Or perhaps they are just actual spires which have been repurposed as gardening sheds, both is very pragmatic of the Impalers. Still, the view.

He has to sneak in, of course, because the Impalers live under the assumption he is here to tend to the flowers and upon discovering him here they'd put him to work, and as stated above, Cadwell is not one for gardening. He grabs one of the larger spears which have been carelessly left out in the open where anyone could nip one. If this was out in Nirn, there would be the potential risk of the spears rusting in the rain, but in Coldharbour it doesn't rain. The weather here is always graceful and pleasant, if sometimes a bit ashy and smokey.

Using the spear as a jumping pole, Cadwell hops across the fence, and proceeds to the nearest garden shed. It is fortunately for him empty, and so starts to climb up the stairs.

*You can't avoid them forever.*

“Hello, Honour! I thought we are not on speaking terms.” Cadwell is pleased to see Honour waddling besides him, even though she is disappointed with him and therefore irritating. That she has decided to extend the femur of peace calls for a celebration, so he grabs a bottle of the amber tonic off the shelf lining the staircase. The Impalers will be most understanding, and it's not like they haven't got spare, and it's not even them who collect this stuff – they have soul shrives for that, who then ship it to the Halls of Torment. What they do with it there is completely beyond Cadwell, however.

*I did not say that. It's not like you to leave your friends, Cadwell. Where is the grace in it? The chivalry, the bravery, the glory, the – excuse the pun – honour?*

“I am sure they are just fine. They are always fine, whether I am there or not.” He picks Honour up, because the shed is really high and has many stairs. Cadwell has strength in his legs, he exercises regularly, but for a little steed such as Honour the uphill climb has to be very exhausting. She makes herself comfortable in her nesting place atop his helmet.

She coos: *Why don't you look?*

Cadwell slightly regrets telling Honour about that trick. It's a good trick, mind you, but Honour tends to use it as an argument. Cadwell himself had only a very vague understanding of how it worked, because the more important part to him was that it worked at all. Still, if he had to explain it, he would do it as follows:

The lunar lattice is an actual lattice, hence the name. All things in it are therefore connected. Which means that people who are connected to the lunar lattice are also connected, like two flies caught in one gigantic spider web, except the spider are two moons, and the flies are people, and the web is not really tangible and hexagonal, but more spiritual and square-shaped. Now, some mage could draw some rather nasty conclusions from knowing this, which is why Cadwell keeps such knowledge mostly to himself. However, the practical effect of this is that if Cadwell does the slightly jiggly-dazzle thing, he can see through the eye of someone else who is attuned in the same manner like he.

Literally through one eye. It seriously messes up depth perception, it is sometimes a bugger. But on the bright side it also allows Cadwell to use his other own eye which is in his head, so he sees into two places at once, and that is really handy. And as far as he knows, besides Honour nobody else knows he can do this. Maybe he could tell Khamira. Although, she would come to bad conclusions, since she is the only other person Cadwell knows to be attuned in the proper way, so she is also the only one whose eye he can use.

Once atop the shed – the roof is steep but dry and therefore easy to make oneself comfortable on – he takes a celebratory swig of the amber tonic and offers a few drops to Honour. He does it out of politeness, however, Honour abstains from such things. She doesn't even take a smoke when Cadwell offers her a good cigar and some brandy, but that just simply means that there are more of these finer things in life left for Cadwell, right?

This batch is strong, it tingles on his tongue and makes the star-less sky seem deeper and richer in colours. It's beautiful like this, if only drinking an excess of this tonic would not cause such a terrible headache.

He closes his eyes and does the slightly jiggly-dazzle thing. When he opens his left eye – It's always the left eye, don't ask him why, it just doesn't work with the right one. – he sees a brightly lit room at some sort of raging party with the curious Mantis folk.

Now, there shouldn't be any assumptions made about the room being brightly lit, that's just how Khajiit eyes work, Cadwell supposes, because whenever he uses Khamira's eye, he can see everything perfectly illuminated, even though everything is actually pitch black to his own eyes. He's tested this, multiple times even.

The party seems to be going rather askew, because the Mantis fellows are rather prone to violence for the most mundane reasons, such as breathing audibly. And there is rather a lot of them, especially the big bullies. And one, no wait two of those... what did Clivia call them again? Swarm-mothers? But then, she called the Mantis by the name Eii, as a plural from Eius. Which, if Cadwell understood it, was a shortcut from the term *eldritch insect*. Strange family, these Tharns, but like father like daughter, who is he to judge?

He's never had children. Well, not any that he would know of. Are there little Cadwells and Cadwellinas? Dear dread, if yes, then it means he is centuries late on his alimments. He surely hopes the mother or mothers are not too crossed about it, but in his defence, until literally now he had no idea he could have children! With whom would he even have them, anyway? He cannot recall any situation in which he could happen to be a father. Now he sort of wishes he had children, because the thought of not having any children makes him feel terribly lonely, even though he is a wandering knight and as such he cannot have any family bonds to tie him down. Nobody ever told him that being a man of noble adventures would be so conflicting.

Honour pecks his foot. *Aren't you forgetting someone?*

“Oh yes, right. They seem to be doing okay. A great party going on in there, they didn't even feel the need to invite me.”

*They all are being terribly murdered, and you are doing what? Sitting here in comfort, drinking a spirit made of blood labour of the defenceless, and whining that you were not invited. By Meridia's light, you make me sick, Cadwell. Positively nauseous.* As if to punctuate her point, Honour barks up a couple of pebbles and a half-digested Xivikyn finger.

It is true that maybe he should make an appearance and kick out the uninvited guests. He almost steps through a portal of his own making, but then out of the corner of Khamira's eye he notices Zar.

Khunzar-ri. Zar. Large and white and muscles like a chiselled marble. He is covered in blood and that gross sticky thing the Mantis bleed, and it makes him look spectacular. Beneath his claws the black chitinous shells shatter to pieces, his face is snarled as he roars in anger. He is as beautiful and enraged as Cadwell remembers him, although he does not remember him much. He is trying very hard not to remember him at all.

He doesn't want to face Zar- Khunzar-ri again. They didn't part their ways in good spirits. Yes, yes, it's completely Cadwell's fault, he killed him, it's logical that Khunzar-ri took it a bit personally. And it is only logical that it would be extremely awkward reunion. He cannot appear there, the hole his shame would burn for him would go through the world and throw him out on the other side in some uncharted place full of queer foreigners.

*Coward.*

“Take that back!”

*Coward. Coward, coward, coward.*

“Honour! I am not a coward!” The insult forces him to stand up. If he cannot have the moral high over his steed, he can at least have the literal.

*Oh, so when Abnur doesn't want to meet his friends, because of all that has happened between them, it is cowardice. But when you do the same, it is not. Honour waddles her way to the edge of the roof. I tell you what that is: Hypocrisy. Not only you are a coward, you are also a hypocrite. And a fool on top of that.*

“I am... not a coward. I am waiting for the right moment. That is all. It is all about the timing,” Cadwell crosses his hands as he mutters. He knows those are all excuses.

Khamira, poor sweet Khamira, is in mortal peril. The chitinous carapace of the swarm-mother is too tough for a regular weapon to pierce through.

Hmm... It is a matter of timing, after all...

“Very well. But you go first. Announce me to the Company, would you?” Honour complies and disappears in a shimmer of star-like dust.

Cadwell takes a deep breath, bracing himself for what is to come. Once he does this, there is no going back. He throws himself off the roof of the garden shed.

It is a long, long way down.

The thing about falling is that the longer you fall, the faster you fall. Very smart men have proved that with a lot of mathematics including letters instead of numbers.

He readies the spear, pointing the sharp stabbing end below himself. The ear whistling by his ear makes him a bit giddy, and the promise of bloodshed excites him greatly.

Piercing weapons rely on the strength of their users, because the greater force you give into the motion, the faster the weapon goes and the greater is the penetrating impact. Cadwell is now going positively very, very fast. Khamira's eye is focused on the swarm-mother towering above her, readying for a brutal swipe which would certainly crush her spine to million pieces.

Two feet before he would hit the ground, there is the ticklish feeling in his teeth and kidneys as he throws himself across all of space into Nirn.

After all, everything is a matter of timing. And placing.

On the other side he emerges just right above the swarm mother. The spear burrows deep into the ugly insect's head, only last few inches are poking out. The impact sends Cadwell tumbling down, and he has only a moment to grab Khamira and pull her from underneath the place into which the colossal beast drops dead.

“Hello! What a funny coincidence, right?” He grins at her, as he does the whole slightly jiggle-dazzle thing backwards, because now he would be looking at his own face, and that would be super weird. Like mirror. Mirrors are super weird. And dangerous.

There isn't any time for a proper chit-chat and catching up on their recent respective activities, because one of those Daedras who are too human to be an actual Daedra tries to decapitate Cadwell. That's seriously rude of her, because where are the manners in that, there should be a dinner first. Cadwell repays her in kind, except unlike her he does not miss.

*I found Lyris!* Honour is looking very proud of herself as she appears hand in hand with the beautiful strong young lady. *You took ages*, she adds as she hops on his shoulder.

“Less talking, more slaughter of these nasty thinguses. Thingi? Thingi.” Like fungus and fungi, right? He propels Honour at the nearest Mantis piercer with the instruction: “Go for the eyes, Honour! Go for the eyes!”

“No, not the eyes!” Lyris hollers back at him. “They can't see shit anyway.”

“You heard her, Honour? Go for the throat!”

Needless to say it is an exquisite party, and in the heat of it nobody really minds that Cadwell has arrived late and uninvited. It is only later, after everyone is either laying on the ground in pools of the weird milky blood and ugly sticky hemolymph, or sitting exhaustedly on broken pieces of furniture, huddling close for the comfort of the warmth and reassurance, and Cadwell is about to ask what this all was supposed to be even about, when the metaphorical boot steps into the clannerfang leavings, so to say.

A strong, large clawed hand falls on Cadwell's shoulder on behind. “You,” growls a voice vibrant like thinly cut slices of liver, and just as rich. The grasp on shoulder is nearly bone-crushing, and Cadwell seriously regrets that he drank the tonic before the noon. Zar really is irresistible like this, the way he talks as if he was purring.

Everyone is looking at the two of them, expressions of anticipated havoc visible on their faces.

He slowly turns around: “Hello! My, how happy I am to see you!”

If he is being honest, he definitely expected the punch in face. That it would send him flying across the room, that one has taken him by surprise.

## Chapter End Notes

I am very new in the Elder Scrolls fandom. Like, super new. Some chapters back I made Local Daedra Expert Abnur Tharn say something about Daedric language, which is a statement entirely incorrect because Daedras don't have a language. However, here is an explanation for you: Daedras have their own jargon where words have archaic or different meaning, and it is a mashup of all the words through Tamrielic languages. I am glad that no one has been such a nit-picker as to point this out to me, that Daedric language is not a thing, and here I am, ironing this crease on my own.



# Speaking of the Moons

## Chapter Summary

Important revelations are made and people are talking too much.

## Chapter Notes

There has been literally no proofreading done in this.

Oh an idea, would you like to have an index of "new" characters and lore about The Other Tamriel at the end of this story? Let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lyris catches Cadwell while he soul shriven is still in the air. Considered that the punch flung him in her direction, it was either that, or getting painfully punched with his kettle in the jaw.

“I've always dreamt of flying. Never thought it would be such a headache, however,” Cadwell says as a way of thanks when he is put back on the ground, rubbing his jaw. “Now,” he turns his back on Khunzar-ri, “anyone mind telling me what this was about? And why is Sai holding Abnur like a sack of potatoes?”

“Because he is an unconscious sack of potatoes,” Sai replies with a smile, and pats Tharn, whom he has thrown over his shoulder, on the back.

“I am awake,” the sack of potatoes says weakly, which is weird because potatoes usually don't speak. “Put me down.”

“We've fought with Mannimarco and his ugly bugs,” Lyris explains to Cadwell.

“Mannimarco? But isn't he, you know...”

“Oh, we've got a spare one from a different version of our world,” Lyris waves her hand, dismissing Cadwell's worries. The knight takes the explanation as the most natural thing.

Khunzar-ri, however, is an over-boiled pot of anger, and now it all spills out: “Zar cannot believe that this treacherous Imperial bastard appears out of nowhere, and you just listen to him, all chummy and friendly as if nothing happened. Have we befriended this backstabbing yakker while this one was not looking? After everything he has done, not only in Elsweyr, but all of Tamriel?”

Cadwell tries to hide behind Khamira, which fails on the premise of him being taller, while rest of the assorted company exchange looks.

Finally Tharn, who still slung over Sai's shoulder has his back and mostly his ass turned on the whole gathering, says: “But I had good intentions. Mostly.”

Everyone stares at him, and Sai actually has to put him down, so he can all the weirded-out faces. Tharn looks around once he finds his balance, and leaning on Sai for additional support he asks:

“Wait. We can say the words 'treacherous Imperial bastard' and *not* mean me?”

Honour clucks and sits in the middle of the room, apparently pleased that everyone is paying it attention, because they don't know where else to look.

“That proves nothing,” Cadwell frowns at it. It seems that he and his steed are having an unfinished argument. What is more interesting is that Honour is apparently winning the said argument.

Somebody needs to step in, otherwise this is going to spiral into an argument of madness about nothing and everyone will hate everyone. Lyris is the first to realize that with enough courage to actually do something about it: “Let's all clean up in here, and then we sit down and talk without trying to kill each other. Are we good, or is that too reasonable for you?”

“As you say, Lyris-do,” Khunzar-ri agrees. He certainly used that suffix to mock her, Lyris is sure, but to lead by example she does not call him out on it.

The corpses are thrown out and being cremated, because as Zamarak pointed out, simply burying them and letting them decompose is simply asking for a daedric corruption of all flora and eventually fauna in the gravesite.

Then the damage to the city and the palace is summarized by Atheleim: “It's drastic, but I personally am surprised there are whole intact buildings.” The civilians have been evacuated in time, and the casualties among the soldiers have been minimal.

It proves rather hard to find functional chairs to sit down on, or an undamaged table to sit around. The kitchen for the matter is beyond any mortal description – Varen, who relies on senses other than his sight and has found about seven new senses beyond the classic five, takes one step in there, and then orders everyone to retreat until the space there untangles into something at least vaguely linear. No one has any idea what that is supposed to mean, but the significant paling of his face convinces them not to argue with him, and they back off from the kitchen.

In the end they get together a number of pillows and sit on them on the floor in the Hall of Thousand Shields. Splinters and debris have been pushed off to the walls, so there is space for them all to sit down.

Varen is still pale, nobody believes Tharn is going to stay conscious for long, Prefect Calo reports in with his right arm in a sling, and Atheleim now fancies a very interesting spell-scar across the back of his head where it does a weird things to the colour of his hair in the places he has any hair left.

Khunzar-ri is the first to speak: “This one wants to know why everyone besides him is so calm in the presence of the bloody insane Betrayer.”

A beat of silence when they exchange looks. Then Tharn sighs and requests: “Everyone who's had their lifesaved by Cadwell on at least one occasion, raise your hand.”

“Does indirectly count?”

“Yes, Sai,” Varen nods with his hand already up.

Except for Atheleim everyone has at least one hand in the air.

Khunzar-ri frowns, growls, puts his hand down. "Fine. But I still don't trust you, Cadwell."

"I can live with that. Honestly, trusting me is overall a bad idea, I'm about as stable as a tower in a violent gale," the soul shriven beams with his signature cheer. "Now, my question: What in Oblivion was going on in here?"

Lyris's brain shut down in self defence so she doesn't have to listen to everyone talking over each other while telling Cadwell all about the other Mannimarco, Zykkm-ahtro, Therisse, the other Tamriel without any sun, and Atheleim's half-prophetic sketching abilities. It takes about half an hour before everyone runs out of breath and information to say.

Cadwell seems to be very deeply thinking about everything he has learned while he is petting Honour's head. Finally he reaches a conclusion: "If I understand this well, our whole goal is to just stuff this new Daedric Prince back into the other room where he came from, and the rest of the Triumvirate will round him up, eh?"

"You make it sound way too easy, Cadwell," Tharn sighs. "We don't even really know what we are fighting against, what to use and-"

"Look, it's just Akatosh, except he's a Daedra now. So we are practically fighting time. The polar opposite of time is space, so that's what we fight with." Now everyone is staring at him.

Almost everyone, Atheleim's look is only polite with an appreciative nod. "I have reached the same conclusions. But unfortunately, I don't know of any power of space strong enough to accomplish what we need."

"Wait, wait. Raz is not catching up, hold this carriage." The Khajiit toys with his earring. "What do you two mean by Alkosh-Akatosh?"

"Well he is a very powerful being in the form of a dragon who lost his power and then gained new power and became a Daedric Prince called the Devourer of Time and is associated with gold," Cadwell shrugs. "If that doesn't make it obvious enough for you, that bracelet Lyris got is made of very suspiciously red shards of a soul gem. Akatosh. Therisse. On and the same god, at the different point of time under very different circumstances."

Gadris and Zur stop staring at the floor. "Magister Atheleim, we understand that this information is not really useful, but still you could have shared it with all of us. It would have been comforting to know."

"I had a suspicion, not a proof. That Cadwell agrees with me does not prove my theory right. And it does not solve our problem anyway; we still have no power over space large enough in its strength to banish Therisse from our world."

"What about the lunar lattice?" Khamira asks all of sudden.

"That would kill you. Shatter your soul like a glass marble" Cadwell dismisses her out of hand. "And I am not sure what it would do to me, but I am quite certain none of us want to know." Then he pauses with a frown, and then he brightens up: "But we could use the reflection of the lunar lattice."

"Since when are you the expert on the lunar lattice?" Khunzar-ri scoffs.

"Since when I murdered a temple full of priests and became attuned and then jumped all over the Oblivion. Oh, Anequina hasn't told you: If you release a large amount of vital energy in small area, such as in mass slaughter, you can use it to become attuned to the lattice. Pretty simple, really.

Morally frowned upon, though.”

Zar is already taking in a breath to start yelling, but Khamira quickly intervenes: “What was that about the reflection, Cadwell?”

“The moon cast their light on Tamriel. But part of it gets reflected back – from the clouds, the water, conveniently placed mirrors and so on. That light which hits the moons again is cast back on Tamriel, creating a web which is the reflection of the lunar lattice. It's not in one place, though, it's fragmented, and also the pieces are travelling all over the place as the moons move in the sky, but if we find them, we can gather them. I don't know how to pinpoint where they are though, I never had to look for them, you know.”

There is a beat of silence as everyone got their hopes very high up only to have them shattered again. Atheleim, however, doesn't want to give up: “Could the positions of those fragments be calculated if one knew all the variables and was really good at arithmetic?”

Honour chirps something. “Probably, yeah,” Cadwell translates.

The Altmer claps his hand together and a really dangerous smile spreads across his face like the Khnatean flu: “Excellent. Then, who wants to to have a field trip with a very intelligent although absolutely insufferable always jabbering know-it-all?”

“Hey!” Tharn protests loudly, which is quite painful to Lyris's ear as she is sitting right next to him.

“Oh, you volunteered, good.”

Tharn closes his mouth with a very audible click of his teeth. “That's not what I mean,” he mumbles.

Razum-dar tilts his head to side with curiosity: “This one wonders what you are planning, Atheleim. Who do you mean?”

“Oh, it's not as much *who*, but rather *what*.” Atheleim scratches his beard as he explains: “I know of a certain artefact, a very talkative calculator. I would love to say that its abilities are overrated, but they are not. I know where to obtain it, well, borrow it for a limited amount of time. However, I can't get it immediately. It will take me a couple of days.”

“Then you better hurry, my friend,” Khamira purrs, “we don't have any time to spare.”

The next three days are lived in the name of repairs, healing, and waiting for Atheleim to show up from his mysterious errands to obtain whatever the hell it is he wants to give Tharn as a mean to find the moon reflection thing. Honestly, Lyris has only a very vague idea about what it is about all of that, but since she isn't needed for it, she doesn't consider it her problem. Tharn is going to handle it, so it's in good hands.

Speaking of Tharn, she and Sai have tried multiple times to coax any information regarding his sudden return of magic out of him, but he dodges them or outright ignores them. So they do the next logical thing and ask Varen who shrugs his feeble shoulders and says: “I suppose he simply broke through the mental barrier.”

“What mental barrier?” demands Lyris.

Varen replies with a question: “If you consign something inside strong walls and lock the doors to

it, why do you do it?"

"Because it is vulnerable and must be protected," Lyris says in the same time as Sai replies: "It is dangerous and must be kept from others."

They are rewarded with a faint smile, and that's pretty much all they get out of Varen as well.

Sai suggest they leave it be. Tharn will either provides answers or he will not, and he will do so when he sees it profitable or at least unharming. There is no use of pressing it. And besides, it is not like either of them particularly cares about Tharn, as Lyris doesn't forget to add.

They might not care for him much, but it doesn't pass unnoticed that Tharn spends as much time in the training grounds of the Fighters' Guild as they do.

"Technically speaking, I am using the Mages' half. Less flammable targets," he explains to them.

"You need training?" Lyris chortles.

Tharn stretches his shoulders. "Titanborn, you are in your own words a master of the battleaxe, yet here you are, training every day. And unlike me you haven't had an extended period of when you were unable to use the weapon of your preference. That I need practice to regain my fine grip of the more subtle of the arts of spellcasting is only logical." He then proves his lack of finer grip by blasting the nearest fireproof training dummy with five fireballs, each of different colour.

Lyris turns on her heel and goes for another round with Razum-dar, who has calimed this morning that he could sweep the floor with her unarmed, and she is now doing her best to prove him wrong. She is not entirely sure if she is winning this, truth be told, but on the other hand it is Raz who has a black eye and not her. But after this round of sparring she calls in for a break, and joins Zur and Gadris who are standing at the wall, observing.

Raz practically collapses down next to them, reaching for the gourd of water and taking a couple of thirsty gulps. "Aaaaah. Ow."

"Had enough?" Lyris smirks.

"This one still could bring you down one more time." He offers her the gourd, and she takes it gratefully. "What are you two looking at?"

The two shrug their shoulders. It seems more natural to them to take on Zur's appearance here in Elsweyr, and so their ears twitch as they say: "We are watching Vanus Galerion watching Abnur Tharn."

"The Guildmaster is here?" Raz whiskers shake. "This one hasn't noticed. He also hopes he hasn't embarrassed himself much."

"Vanus probably didn't notice you at all. Ah, he has now," Gadris and Zur sigh. "That's what you get for staring, Raz."

"Good morning," says the Altmer who has just approached them. Lyris has heard some things about Galerion's exploits and escapades, but none of them could prepare her for the fact that his face has the perfect shape to punch him squarely in the jaw. "Zur, I haven't seen you in ages. How are you faring?"

“We- This one is good. Good.”

Raz and Lyris exchange looks and there is silent agreement between them: If the two mages haven't told their Guild that Gadriss has returned, then neither the Eye nor the warrior are going to bring it up.

“I am very happy to hear that,” Vanus smiles, and then turns back again to watch Tharn who is now going through every shield spell he knows. “Quite a show-off, isn't he?”

“Honestly, it's quite underwhelming,” Lyris sips from the gourd. “He's completely out of form. And just look at that roof he's just made, it's frilly at the edges. That's just sloppy.”

Vanus blinks and slowly considers her comment: “This level of precision he has is hard to find in many accomplished mages, not to mention the speed and strength he is performing.”

“Mhm,” Lyris hums. It doesn't change the fact that what Tharn is putting on sale in this stall is really far from what he usually offers, so to say. “Don't tell him that. Either his ego would go through the roof or he would assume you're being sarcastic, and trust me, you don't want to risk either of the outcomes.”

“Oh look,” Gadriss and Zur point out. “Atheleim.”

Lyris's eyes follow to where they are pointing, and indeed, it is the Magister of Doom Sketches, he is carrying a sturdy box, and when he notices them, he pales enough for his gold elven skin to resemble silver.

Vanus besides her growls: “Well, well, well, isn't that interesting.”

Atheleim makes his way towards them, along the way Tharn joins him, slightly red in face and trembling from the magicka exhaustion. “Hi,” Atheleim manages in a strangled voice, purposefully avoiding looking at Vanus.

“Hello, Varitalas,” the Guildmaster's voice has a cutting edge to it. “What are you doing here? Or no, wait, I don't really care about that. Why are you dressed as a mage? That's a more important question in my eyes.”

“It looks plausible, and people don't ask me things then,” Atheleim shrugs.

“So the Order is spying on me.”

“What, no! Well, yes, but not more than on anyone else, and I am not one doing it,” Atheleim puts the box down and starts toying with the locks.

“Hold that carriage,” Razum-dar demands. “Order? Varitalas? What is going on?”

“Varitalas used to be my name. About, oh, three hundred ears ago or so. I was a completely different person back then,” Atheleim explains. One of the locks opens with a satisfactory click. “Nowhere near as interesting as those seventy years I was a woman, let me tell you.”

That makes even Lyris to take a mental step back and consider Atheleim in new light. But what it means is that everyone is quiet for a moment as the other and third locks are unlocked.

“Raz, do you remember how you asked us in Tenmar if anyone of us has a Psijic in their pocket?” Atheleim turns to the Khajiit.

“This one recalls it, yes.”

“Do you remember that I actually said 'no'?”

Razum-dar groans, but he has to laugh. “You're such an ass, Atheleim. An absolute ass.”

Tharn has apparently reached the conclusion that they've had enough of dramatic revelations:

“Alright, what's in the box? I'm making a wild guess I am going to become rather familiar with it.”

It turns out to be a skull carved out of a greenish crystal. Vanus stares at it in disbelief, and then he whispers: “Oh. Oh no.”

“What?” Zur and Gadris take a close look at the skull. “What's wrong with it?”

“That's the bloody Augur of the Obscure,” Vanus says. “I have no idea for what requires for such drastic measures, but-”

“Oh, they want me to find the reflection of the lunar lattice for them,” the skull says. “Such a trivial task, really, you could do that on your own if you had at least half of your meaty brains functional. But no, apparently you all need me for this.”

The awkward silence that falls upon the group like an acidic rain is broken by Atheleim who takes the skull and practically forces it into Tharn's hands saying: “Here. It's bound to answer all your questions truthfully and in a manner you can understand. Good luck.”

“Awesome! So you are the poor human excuse for existence that I am supposed to work with. So if we are going to get the reflection – Do you mind calling me it ROLL for a short? No? Great – so to get the ROLL we need to attune to it. Do you know any alchemist and an Argonian priest who owes you a favour?”

“I am not really sure I like where this is headed,” Tharn inspects the artefact suspiciously. “Excuse us, I think this is going to be a longer talk.” With the Augur in hands he leaves the group, heading to the shade of a nearby tree growing by the well.

Vanus waits until Tharn is out of earshot. “Given the reputation of the Chancellor, I propose a bet on which of those two gives up first. My wager is on the Augur to drive him crazy.”

“I match you,” Lyris grins a wolfish smile, “fifty golds on Tharn making that thing beg for mercy and silence.”

“Deal.”

## Chapter End Notes

Tharn's adventure with the Augur chasing the ROLL might quite possibly become a standalone fic. In case you'd like to read it I learn of that, I'll write it.

# Race Against the Time

## Chapter Summary

Cadwell is brave, everybody except Lyris has something important to do, a daedric bastard is a bed, and time is running out.

## Chapter Notes

I know I took my sweet time, but these plague holidays are not actually helpful for productivity. However, two days ago I have reached that point when I've been playing ESO so much that I am over-sated with it, so I finally gathered the power to do something else.

This chapter was supposedly to be even longer, but I ultimately decided against it. It will instead leave a little "hole" in the narration which would be very hard to fill up with Lyris's POV, and will be instead covered in the story about Tharn chasing the reflections of the lunar lattice.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tharn leaves with the Augur in that afternoon. He would have left sooner, but Zamarak has tackled him down and refused to get off his back until the man said goodbye to everyone. That takes a while, because not only that the man puts up a fight, but also some people are very hard to find.

Namely Cadwell. No one knows where Cadwell is. Lyris joins Tharn to search for him, because she is fairly worried about the soul shriven, as he has been acting queer ever since he came back. Queerer than his usual, that is. The only reason Lyris is sure he hasn't left is because she occasionally sees Honour wandering about, trying to eat various things (notably Sai has been complaining about the sudden loss of his shoelaces). Eventually they find him on the top roof of the palace, sitting on the very edge and kicking his legs in the air.

“Hey,” Lyris sits down next to him. Tharn takes his place by Cadwell's other side, although it takes him a moment, as he obviously isn't feeling well so close to a thirty feet or so drop. Maybe it's fifty feet. Once you get past thirty feet, it doesn't really matter from how high up you fall, you end up as a dead meat pancake once you hit the ground if you are lucky. If you are less lucky, you get crippled for the rest of your life. Better dead then dependent if you ask Lyris, which isn't the guideline for everyone, but losing her mobility and independence is what she fears the most.

“Oh, hello. What are you two doing up here?” Cadwell doesn't look up from his helmet which he is turning around in his hands.

“I am leaving to find that reflection of the lunar lattice of yours, already I know it is going to be the worst trip of my life, so I thought I'd at least say farewell.”

Cadwell's eyebrows to a curious wave as he turns his head to give Tharn a good look. “Surely you jest. You always run off without saying a word.”



Tharn's expression sours. "Alright, Zamarak thought I ought to say farewell and threatened me with very descriptive physical violence if I didn't, and since I am at it, I am not going to leave you out of it."

"Ah, alright then," Cadwell says, returning his attention to the helmet. "Bye-bye, off you go, you have a Tamriel to save and all that, you better hurry, right?"

Lyris expects Tharn to get up and sod off, because that's what he always does, and there is actually a twitch to him as he is about to do just that. But he stops himself and remains sitting there with them in silence.

Eventually Cadwell snaps at them with a growl: "What?"

"You cannot just build walls around your life and expect things to get better just so."

"Oh, like you get to talk," Cadwell scoffs.

"I am speaking from experience which has proven that it doesn't work. If you find yourself harmful, withdrawing yourself from the world does not magically heal everything."

Lyris recalls Varen asking her and Sai about locking up things behind strong walls. She recalls the first days Tharn was awake back in Titan's Hearth – It is something that feels to be so far away despite it being what, three weeks at most – the quietness, the chairs under the cupboards, the chopped wood, the lack of constant needling, all of that tainted with the thick sweetness of mead blurring the memories at the edge and making them distant the way things behind a window are distant.

She also recalls that none of the once-Companions reached out to each other. She gave up her old battleaxe in the Valley of Blades, and never tried to contact Tharn to hold him accountable, she didn't search for Varen to learn what became of him, she did not write to Sai to let him know she was alright.

It probably took a lot of courage from Sai to send that letter to her. Suddenly she realizes that it was probably Varen's idea – and those two met only by chance! That thought is like a bucket of ice cold water, and it makes her wonder if she would have come here at all if she hadn't scorched Tharn in her bed. Probably not. She would pretend it was the wrong address, because how would she be able to look Sai in the eyes after four years of silence? She wouldn't know how much he needed her by his side.

"This was all so much easier when I didn't remember," Cadwell mumbles. "When the past just wasn't a thing and all that was, was the present." Lyris can't recall Cadwell to ever sound so sorrowful.

"Hey, if this is about the fact that you killed, Zar, that was ages ago," Lyris pokes him in shoulder. "Who cares?"

"Well he obviously cares," Cadwell frowns. "And I am utterly sorry that I did that. As I am now, such a thought wouldn't cross my mind. Or maybe it would, but I wouldn't act on it. But how does one apologize for such a thing? Even if I knew how to, he wouldn't listen to me"

Lyris doesn't know the answer to that. But Tharn does: "You don't. You start acting better, that's what you do."

"And that helps?" The soul shriven isn't really convinced.

“Sometimes,” Tharn replies with a shrug. “But even when it doesn't, it makes it easier to live with yourself.”

Lyris smirks: “Speaking from experience?”

“Always, Lyris. I have a lot of years of experience to speak from after all. Anyway,” he gets up with a grunt and cracking of multiple joints, “take care, both of you. I better pick up my talkative overrated abacus, and be on my way.”

“Hmm...” Cadwell puts his helmet back on. “Have you ever been to the Gardens of Treason?”

“Uh, once. Very briefly,” Lyris admits. “Not that I had the time to stop and admire the flowers, so to say, I was too busy running.”

“Ah, you have certainly missed out! When you get back,” Cadwell jabs Tharn in chest, “I'll give you all a tour around.”

Tharn gently pushes Cadwells hand away. “As kind offer as it is, I'll have to decline. The last time I was in Coldharbour I had to kill a friend, and I do not want to risk it becomes a habit.” With that he turns around and begins a very careful descend back on the solid ground.

“What about you, Lyris?” Cadwell turns to her when the man is gone. “What are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking,” she starts slowly, “that either Tharn's been far more frequent to Coldharbour than I thought, or he just referred to us as friends, and honestly I am not sure what's creepier.”

“Oh, I meant about the garden tour.”

It would be a crime to let the man down in that moment. “Sure. Once we survive through all this shit that's happening right now. Let's get back down, I'm getting one hell of a vertigo.”

She gets back to her room, which is still missing the whole wall with window, sore and slightly inebriated. Nords define slightly inebriated as that moment when they can't walk in a straight line anymore, but still don't have to lean on walls for support.

Her room smells like smoke, blood, and iron, which she doesn't mind that much, she's used to that, but as she makes her way towards the bed, she trips over something and lands on the floor as tall as flat, and her forehead just narrowly misses the night stand. It takes her a heated and loud moment to feel better.

A voice behind her says: “That is not a ladylike manner of speech at all.”

With great effort Lyris sits up and turns around. “Zykkm-bloody-ahtro, you son of a horker! What are you doing here?”

She can make out the shape of his curved horns, so he isn't presenting himself as a human today. His pale-blue eyes glow dimly in the dark, and so do the tattoos which go from the back of his head to his back and shoulders where they disappear under armour.

“I was just passing around, thought I'd see how you are doing.” Despite the casual tone there is a slight lips to him, one you get when you loose a couple of teeth and get your lip split and you still haven't learned how to talk around it.

There is knocking and then the door creaks open again, letting in a streak of light from a candle. Sai's heavy steps. And then his voice: "Lyris? Everything alright? I heard curses and I thought..." His words trail away when he notices the blasted Iddaroth.

Zykkm-ahtro grins, Lyris can see it because his slaughterfish-like teeth glisten and indeed he is missing some of them. There is a streak of milk-white blood which turns out to be luminescent in the dark. "This place is missing a whole wall, and you bother with knocking?"

"I was not raised under a rock," Sai replies curtly. "Lyris?"

"I'm fine. Just pissed off." Lyris stands up. "You, though. You have a lot of talking to do, Thorny."

And thus they drag the slightly protesting Daedra out of Lyris's room down the hall to the dining room, leaving Zur and Gadrin in their wake with the instruction to gather everyone important and follow them.

So there they are: Sai, Lyris and Zykkm-ahtro, Varen and Prefect Calo who haven't left the dining room at all, Zur and Gadrin slightly annoyed that they can't have a moment alone with each other, Razum-dar and Athelein who still aren't talking to each other, Khunzar-ri and Cadwell who are pretending not to see each other, Khamira in her pyjamas, and Zamarak who in the twenty minutes Lyris hasn't seen him lost his shirt.

They all are looking Zykkm-ahtro and he is repaying in kind, because with exceptions they haven't seen each other, despite Lyris has informed everyone about the non-hostile Daedra. Besides that, he looks beaten like a peach after a day in a backpack.

"We are sorry that we couldn't get out Daedra expert, but Tharn has buggered off early in the afternoon to gods know where already," the two mages inform them helpfully.

"This Tamriel has too many Tharns for my liking," Zykkm-ahtro mumbles. He then sighs and wipes the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand. "Very well then, what do you want to hear?"

"Well, for a starter," Lyris tries to hide her annoyance and the fact that she has sobered up far too quickly for her liking, "why didn't you tell us about Akatosh outright."

"I'll get to that," Zykkm-ahtro rests his claws on the table. "But first a clarifying question. Who or what is Akatosh?"

It delivers differently across the whole table, but the reaction clearly states that while they were all expecting some sort of deception or omission or even just a bad excuse, they weren't expecting absolute ignorance.

There is a bubbling sound, and then Cadwell stop trying to talk into his tea – Where did he get tea from anyway? – and chimes: "Akatosh is what your Therisse was before he went, I suppose, batshit crazy."

"Ah. Thank you for illuminating me, Cadwell." Nobody questions how or why Zykkm-ahtro knows Cadwell.

Lyris cuts in: "Alright. Next question: What the hell do you want? And no way I am falling for that you just wanted to say hi. Try that on someone more stupid."

When Zykkm-ahtro notices everyone's cold looks, which are partially caused by the fact that they have been mostly dragged out of beds because of him, he sighs. "You would probably like to know

that Mannimarco on the behalf of Therisse made progress. He hasn't found what he was looking for, otherwise we wouldn't even have the chance to meet like this, but in the Nibenay Valley he found a way to find it, it seems.”

“And you know that how?” Khamira purrs as she helps herself to Cadwell's tea.

“That bastard threw me through a wall while he was at it,” the Iddaroth shrugs. “I knew he was coming there, his patterns have become predictable to me over the years. Clivia Tharn seemed to be in need of little help preserving the place, and I was more than happy to help that lovely young lady once she stopped throwing knives at me. I think you will be pleased to hear that the damage to both the place and the life was minimal.”

There is a moment of silence as all of that sinks in. In the end Zykkm-ahtro gives them a thin-lipped smile and says: “Whatever it is we are going to do, we better do it quickly. It is only a matter of time until Mannimarco gets what he is after, and then it will be too late for everything.”

“Our plan is already being executed,” Varen speaks calmly despite the words of impending doom still hanging heavy in the air. “The time we have is enough.”

Zykkm-ahtro considers the short blind man. “You sound very sure of it.”

“I have faith. And also no other option,” he adds with a smile.

“Bah. Faith.”

Eventually, after some additional arguing, the whole company scatters to their rooms, leaving the Daedra alone in the dining room among the empty plates, empty bottle, empty chairs and empty threats of what they are going to do to him if he tries anything.

Lyris and Sai wait for Varen, they have a long part of their way to their rooms together.

“My Lord,” Sai starts and not even his beard can hide the smile that appears on his face when Varen flinches at the title, “why are you so certain we have enough time?”

Varen adopts a grin of which any wolf could be rightfully proud. “If I am not mistaken, what Therisee and subsequently Mannimarco are looking for is the Amulet of Kings. And this necromancer from the other world has learned what is more or less a common knowledge among us: There is only one person who knows where the Amulet currently is. And that person happens to be very good at running, lives with the paranoia that there is always someone after him, and on the top of it is now armed with the purest mathematical genius Tamriel has ever seen.”

“Shouldn't we at least warn Tharn?” Lyris asks with concern.

“Even if we had the means to contact him, what would the warning change?” They have to admit that nothing – everything that could be done is already being done. “Don't forget that he cannot be found through any other means than us or very precious prediction of what he is going to do and where he is going to be, and this Mannimarco, unlike the one we have dealt with, is not familiar with either of us. Ease your minds and go to sleep, both of you. We can only wait now.”

Lyris makes it to her bed and not even five minutes later she regrets not accepting Sai's offer to spend the night in his room instead. Not because the enlarged window she now has makes the room draughty, Divines know she appreciates some cool air, but she is feeling incredibly lonely.

That feeling leaves her a while later, but not in a good sense: The door opens quietly and uneven steps sound on the floor. The intruder asks in whisper: “Are you asleep?” It would have awakened her even if she wasn't, because in his Daedric form Zykkm-ahtro sounds like somebody stuffed a

large metallic tube down his throat and then forced him to speak through another one, but nevertheless Lyris doesn't answer him in the hope that if she doesn't react, he leaves her be.

It works only with partial success: he doesn't attempt to talk to her again, but he doesn't leave the room. Instead he limps to the corner where he presumably takes off his heavy armour, if the metallic clinking is any sort of hint, and then lays down on the floor. When Lyris moves her arm to see him, she sees him in the pale moonlight of the two waxing moons curled up in a ball.

For some reason, Lyris cannot shake off the image of a tomcat returning to his barn to lick his wounds.

If there were any historians present, they would describe the following days somewhere along the lines about the calm before the storm, but they'd be very much mistaken, because Rimmen is anything but calm. A city under reconstruction is rarely actually calm. There is a distinctive lack of fighting, though, and a notable amount of masons, carpenters, builders and architects running around doing their work of which Lyris has the vague understanding like everyone who has built one or two pillow forts and many various tents in very improvised settings from improvised materials for more people than should be physically capable to live in such a confined space.

To put it simply, she feels out of place. That is partially because she has been kicked out of her room as the reconstructions are giving it back its missing wall, and so she has to bunk with Sai now. Not that she minds, it's free cuddles and he makes for a good blanket, but she can't help but feel like an intruder. The other part is that she is in the nearly constant presence of people who are very busy doing something while she does nothing, and that is blowing quite the wind in the sails of her guilt-boat. Out of desperation she asks a janitor if there is something she could help with, and gets funny looks for it. It doesn't help that Sai actually knows some shit about architecture and so spends the whole day helping rebuilding Rimmen, so when they meet in the evening he can talk about his day and what got done and how it is all progressing, and all she can say is that it's cool, and hope he doesn't ask her what she has been up to, because this is what she is up to: Nothing.

On the other hand, she is not the only person stuck like that, and because misery loves a little company, she gets to hang out with Atheleim, Varen, and much to everyone's annoyance Zykkm-ahtro, who has practically set up a camp in the palace now, and refuses to go outside in the broad daylight. And so they hang out together. By the third day it feels like their little group has fallen into a rhythm without talking about it: They meet up after breakfast in the Hall of Thousand Shields. Atheleim pretends to read and then switches to doodling nonsenses. Lyris does unnecessary maintenance to her weaponry and armour – never in her life she remembers her cuirass to be so polished and spotless. Zykkm-ahtro is trying to provoke them all into an argument or a fight, as his armour is holding together on some daedric magic as it is far beyond the point of saving, and therefore there is no point pretending he is tending to it whatsoever. Varen is quiet until it becomes too much to bear and he produces a bottle of moon-sugared plum wine and after taking a hearty swig he passes it around. Atheleim looks like he is drinking it despite himself.

The wine is sweeter and sourer than mead, and just as thick. It is the first good alcohol Lyris has had since she came to this gods forsaken desert. She stops herself from drinking it all and hands the bottle to the Daedra who pushes her hand away with the words: “As much as I appreciate the sentiment, alcohol has no effect on my metabolism. I'll pass, more left for you.”

Somewhere around the bottom of the bottle Atheleim starts sobbing, and when Varen comes up with the second one, Lyris realizes that the wine is also far stronger than mead. Otherwise she cannot explain feeling so sluggish and using Zykkm-ahtro as a headrest. It's a good thing he is not

doing the whole human form thing right now, because as a horrible toothy horned spine-thorned clawed monster, his shoulder is around the correct height for Lyris to put her head on. With the human face on he is so tiny.

“Throny-amber,” she hears a voice asking, and it takes a moment to realize it is her voice, “how do you fit all of this into that almost-human suit?” No harm in asking, right? Oh wait, it's a question. “It's my question, alright.”

“Wrong question Lyris,” he replies. “It's not a suit. More like, this is my daedra suit.”

Through a terrible case of hiccups Atheleim manages to ask how does that even work. “I thought that you were human and got changed to a daedra,” he adds as Varen wrestles the third bottle of wine out of his hands.

“It is safer to do such a drastic physical change over an extended period of time,” Zykkm-ahtro sighs. “It diminishes the risk of something going awry, and I have been told that the first Iddaroths Therisse had created died of mental shock or became unreliable and insane. Eventually I will fully change into this form you now perceive. But for now, you can think of it as of a reflection.”

“So,” Lyris concludes, “you are growing horns right now.”

“They are a headache.”

“You have horns?” Varen asks as he puts down the now empty bottle. He hasn't happened to brought third with him. Shame. “I never imagined you to have horns. I always thought a lot of spikes for some reason.”

“Well,” Zykkm-ahtro shoots him a weary look, “you thought wrong. Now wait a minute, what is this? No, no, Varen, let go off my head – Ow that was my eye you idiot! – alright, right, sure touch the horns all you like, just let me know when you are finished. Hey, I didn't say sprawl all over me. I am not a bed! Not you too, Varitalas. Atheleim. I mean Atheleim. Get off, all three of you this instant! No, don't even think about wrapping your filthy mortal hands around me!”

Lyris can't help herself, she has to giggle a bit, because the Iddaroth is wiggling and writhing in attempts to shake them all off. She is very much aware that if he really wanted them to leave him alone, they'd be scattered across the room, probably in pieces. Even a daedra has to maintain a certain reputation.

Sai doesn't return to their room that evening, and his absence is even worse than his talk of today's accomplishments could ever be. Lyris tosses and turns the whole night, waking minutes ably after falling asleep repeatedly. Whenever she turns around, she expects to see Sai Sahan in the bed next to her. When finally in one of those regretful moments of wakefulness she hears the door opening, it comes to her as a great relief.

It is not a long lived feeling, because the footsteps are wrong. Sai Sahan is a heavy man, but his steps are light, calculated – he doesn't move like a soldier but like an Altmer silent actor, that kind which dances instead of speaking. Sai doesn't walk, he prowls like a tiger on a hunt. Whoever this is, they drag their feet as if they were wearing leaden shoes, and they make long steps. It is not Zykkm-ahtro either, his footsteps have this quality but they are much heavier than this.

Lyris sits up. She has her fists clenched and ready to do some permanent dental surgery on whoever it is that has just entered.

“Lyris? Are you asleep?”

“Atheleim,” she breathes out. She feels a shudder as a wave of tension rolls off her. She gets up to light a candle so the two of them can see each other face to face. Even in the weak light she has lit she notices that the mer's eyes are puffy and reddened. Also he is wearing a proper shirt for once. He is shaking from exhaustion.

It comes to Lyris that he must have been crying mere moments ago, and for a very long time at that. She tries to sound comforting as she asks: “Can I do something for you?”

“I wanted to- Um. Yes.” He gulps. “Could you cut my hair? Please,” he adds a beat later.

She echoes: “Cut your hair...” What? Why? Right now?

“I've brought my own scissors and a razor,” Atheleim shows her hopefully. That answer at least one of the questions: Yes, right now.

Lyris doesn't want to have a bunch of elven hair on the floor here, so they move out on a balcony where there is at least some fresh air. Half of the balcony is missing, but whatever, right? Sai's said that this part is going to be worked on the next week if everything goes smoothly.

So there are the two of them, a pair of scissors, a shaving razor, a bowl of water which Atheleim is keeping warm on his lap with some magic, and some faintly glowing blue glyph-things on Atheleim's back, because Lyris has told him to take that shirt off.

She takes the scissors and runs a finger along the edge. Sharp. Good, she hates using dull instruments. *Snip snip*. The sound is satisfying as she opens and closes them, even though she knows that in ten minutes it is going to give her a horrible cramp in wrist, because her hand is simply too large for it. “How short?”

“Bald.” He is clutching some blue-glowing crystal between his knees, so it drowns everything nearby in odd light full of water ripples.

Well, his hair isn't that amazing that it is any shame to lose all of them, but that is quite the decision what he's made here. Nevertheless, she gets to work. If he wants to shed it all, it doesn't matter how messy work she does now. The locks fall to the ground.

“Atheleim?” she asks as she gets to the delicate area around the ears. No reaction. “Man, stop shaking.”

“S-sorry.” Oh, that's why he trembles like an aspen. He is crying, again.

“Not that I particularly care, it's just you don't want to lose your ears, do you?” She doesn't get a reply for that, but the man holds rigidly still.

It doesn't take much longer than that for her to conclude that with this poor lighting conditions she cannot do any more damage to the hair unless she gets her hands on the razor, so that's exactly what she does.

There is a popular belief that women don't know how to shave. All you need to know about it this: It is wrong, and it is popular among men. Most of women who are married tend to the visage of their husbands. Then there is this fashion that came out of... probably Rivenspire, because in Lyris opinion all weird fashions come out of Rivenspire, of ladies shaving their legs and armpits and pubic hair and sometimes also eyebrows. Not to mention all the girls who shave part or all of their hair to get a certain look. Lyris herself in an attempt to fit better into the army shaved her face

along with the guys, not that it helped, but it pronounced the fact that she had a jaw fit to crack walnuts open with.

So she knows what she is doing, and Atheleim ends up not getting scalped. It is a slow and methodical work, sometimes she uses the discarded shirt as a towel to dab dry the golden skin. As she progresses, to her surprise she uncovers tattoos, similar to the glyph things. However, the light blue glow quickly fades, and if Lyris didn't know what she was looking for, she would dismiss the slightly discoloured skin out of hand as nothing important.

She wants to ask about those, but she doesn't. There is something sacred to this silence as she gets rid of Atheleim's hair and the sky to her left slowly pales reddens as the dawn approaches. Dawn is the time of change. It occurs to Lyris that perhaps along with the hair, Atheleim is shedding also a part of his life. Elves like such kind of symbolism. At least those that she got to know.

When Lyris is somewhat little more than halfway through, somebody behind her whistles and she nearly cuts the elf to the bone. She turns around to face Razum-dar, who still has two claws in his mouth, and Zur and Gadris swishing their white tail from side to side.

“Lyris-do,” the two mages smile at her, “we were looking for you and thought- Wait. What's happened to Atheleim?” The moment they mention him, Razum-dar's expression changes into a frown. He has to be still upset about the whole secret Psijic thing

Gadris and Zur, however, are more concerned about the unmoving Altmer. “Hey, Atheleim? Are you alright?” They stride over to him and shake his shoulder.

The mer turns his head to them, slowly blinks like a kitten who's seen daylight for the first time, and asks: “Pardon me, who is Atheleim?” He smiles an innocent smile. A bit *too* innocent, if you ask Lyris.

She doesn't think about it much, though, because she is hypnotized by the sun finally showing upon the horizon, red like blood. The sight for some reason fills her with a sense of pain and dread, and it takes a moment for her to realize why: The sky should be lightening up to orange and then light blue. But instead it is still the deep purple as it was. Whatever this is, it is very ominous. Her eyes in the search for something orange inform her that below in the valley something orange is indeed there. A bright light. And smoke.

“Guys, we can have a talk about this sudden change later,” she stops Raz before he can introduce no-longer-Atheleim to his fist. “What is it burning down there?” She indicated the direction with her razor.

“Where?” Razum-dar's eyes widen when he sees the fire. “That's Hakoshae. We have to alarm the soldiers to get there and help and- And what is *that*?”

It looks like a golden falling star, if stars fell in valleys and were headed from burning settlements towards the Rimmen palace and if they were pursued by a cloud of Mantis.

Zur has probably panicked, because Gadris switched places with him. Lyris doesn't blame him at all. Raise the alarm. They don't have the time and almost everyone is asleep, but this is what they do. They raise raise alarm.



Conclusion and sort of an epilogue in the next chapter. I hope you are looking forward to it.

Please, do not worry about Atheleim. He hasn't suffered a sudden case of memory loss. He's just decided to change his identity completely and bail out of all of this. (Again)

## Interlude: Additional Thoughts on Coexistence (by A. Thorn)

### Chapter Summary

It all ends here. Is it a tragedy?

### Chapter Notes

I waited with publishing this until the ESO 6th Jubilee started in game, because I thought I'd be rather symbolic. I didn't wait long, only like, an hour and half. In the OpenOffice document, this thing has beautiful 100 pages (including chapter names done in big letters), I am tired and in need of something to eat. You've made it this far, you can make it to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Daedras do not require sleep. Or food. Zykkm-ahtro can brag and boast about himself belonging among the daedras, but the truth is that he does not belong there fully. Not yet, anyway. His transition from a human to a powerful immortal being dwelling in Oblivion is slow. Also, he doesn't think that his status as an Iddaroth is anything to brag and boast about.

He does need to eat, even though as the metamorphosis progresses he notices himself losing the ability to digest most of meals. He doesn't need to sleep, but he has found out that life is particularly easier to live when he closes his eyes and stops perceiving the world personally from a time to time. It shatters the long chain of events that is life into smaller segments which are more easily wrestled and wrangled. It helps him to retain his sanity and someone like Zykkm-ahtro, the actual founder of the Triumvirate, the Grand Traitor, somebody like him needs to keep his wits about him all the time. Also, ever since alcohol stopped working, sleep has been his only way of shutting out all the problems out of his head for at least a little while.

He is awoken from his slumber by the terrible feeling a Daedric Prince is looming over his shoulder, and so while he is usually a slowly waking person, right now he is up and at ready for anything even before he has his eyes fully opened, and way before he does the routine inventory people do every morning when they wake up. The air is hot, outside buzz insects, light is pouring into the room, and his stomach feels all knotted.

As the sense of immediate danger doesn't progress to grow and remains at the same level as, say, in Neverend or Coldharbour, Zykkm-ahtro takes the leisure and slowly blinks himself fully awake. All his extremities are accounted for, which is always a good thing, somewhere in his sleep he has shifted back into his almost-human form, and so he quickly fixes it. The mortals cannot tell how badly bruised the fight in Nibenay has left him by his daedric form, but if he was to promenade around with a human face on, they would realize he escaped there by the skin of his teeth. Why is that even an expression, anyway? Teeth have no skin, have they not?

He notices the Chainbreaker – Cadwell, here they call him Cadwell, in this strange world with sun and names – curled up on the floor around his ridiculous headwear, in which Honour is sleeping

soundly. He recalls the previous evening when the soul shriven entered or rather sneaked into the Hall of Thousand Shields, and he commented on the change in his clothing.

Upon Zykkm-ahtro's arrival, the peculiar man was wearing an apparel made entirely out of cooking utilities and some scraps which he probably picked up along the way. Yesterday evening, however, he saw him wearing old battered black armour which Zykkm-ahtro's educated guess placed somewhere pre-Vesper Nedic military which is pretty much all that he has managed to ever tie to the Chainbreaker's identity. Seeing him like this was a familiar sight

He does not remember word to word what exactly he said, but he remembers the answer given to him with a sad smile: "I figured that that fancy garb had nobody here fooled. And it chaffed me in places." It left Zykkm-ahtro with more questions, but he asked none of them out loud.

With a turn he looks out of the window to guesstimate the time. The sun is out completely, it's bottom curve just barely above the horizon, bleeding red across the sky like the stars of the true Nirn – his home.

Wait, hold on, that is actually not supposed to be a thing in this world, is it? Here no Chimer bleed the stars, and certainly not *the sun*!

The air suddenly fills with tremble and noise of ringing bells. The Chainbreaker stirs on the floor and sits up with a groan. "Golly, my head is giving me quite the porridge end of the paddle."

Zykkm-ahtro pulls him up. "That is not your ear. They are ringing to arms."

"To arms? Not that you find me complaining against a little morning exercise, Thorny-boy, but whom are we fighting?"

The feeling that a Prince is looking just over his shoulder, breathing down his neck. The bleeding sun. The buzzing of insect. "Therisse," Zykkm-ahtro breathes out.

As he reaches his hand to Oblivion to retrieve his spear, he has to remind himself that his loyalty does not lie to his creator, but to the Triumvirate as whole. What he is doing is not a treason. A thought of treachery and betrayal would never cross his mind, so he has sworn in front of the three Thrones – it is the Gold who betrayed the Bone and the Iron. This is not an act of treason nor defiance, and he is certainly not using this situation to take out his anger on Therisse for ever turning him into a daedra. No, all he is doing is his duty to preserve the Triumvirate and that is the best purpose he could put the gift that is Therisse's embrace to use.

The bell stops its rallying cry a moment before a squadron of the mantis burst into the room through the closed window. Glass and chitin fills the air.

Cadwell and Zykkm-ahtro fight them back to back. The Iddaroth hurls spells of pain and death through the air without any thoughts of their cost – the amount of magicka present on this Nirn never ceases to amaze him, it is as if after years of roaming parched plains he found a well without a bottom.

The room begins to clear up from the door. It takes a moment to become clear why: Sai Sahan, the infuriatingly charismatic swordsman, has entered the scene. As soon as he sees them he demands: "Where is Lyris?"

"For whatever reason you think I know," Zykkm-ahtro grunts as he tears three carapaces off his spear, which is strongly reminiscent of a skewer in this moment, "you are wrong."

"Don't be ridiculous, daedra," Sai spits out a bit of blood. What manners, spitting on palace floors...

“You are practically glued by her side all the time.”

“Yes, and she won't shut up about you.” Zykkm-ahtro growls and side-steps around the Chainbreaker to get Sai Sahan into his field of vision. “It almost feels like I am courting you myself.”

“What?”

Several loud *ding*'s following each other so quickly they nearly merge into one unbroken sound fill the air, a sound like somebody took a Mantis piercer by its frail thorax and repeatedly crashed its head into the warning bell.

“I bet you a constellation she is atop the belfry,” Zykkm-ahtro flashes his teeth at the Sword Saint, and then uses them to bite off the head of the nearest insect beast. He spits it out, their poor substitute of blood is poisonous even to the most resilient of the daedras.

Towers are usually good positions in the regard of defence as long as you stand on the top of it, as it gives you the advantage of the high ground and there is really only one way the enemy can get to you. Of course, there is also only one way how you can get down when you think about it.

The stairs on their way up are slick with thick half-dried blue hemolymph. No blood, Zykkm-ahtro notices, and he finds an odd kind of peace in that realization. On their way up through the swarming Mantis, the stairs become even slicker.

“The mopping lady is going to be very unhappy with us, mark my words,” Cadwell nearly curses as his sword causes an irreparable damage to a wall and heaps of chitin. The mason is going to be very unhappy as well, but somehow that doesn't seem to be the Chainbreaker's concern in the slightest. How peculiar...

“Cadwell? Is that you?” The question comes from above, by the voice it is the Soul-melded Mage. Mages? Does it matter?

The soul shriven hollers back: “Erm, I mean, maybe!”

“Why doesn't that tuft of coughed up fur teleport up here if he killed so many people to be able to?” grumbles somebody else above them.

“Don't be like that, Zar. How else am I supposed to shred these ugly things into a ribbon?”

“Cadwell,” Sai Sahan speaks with a certain urgency to his voice from behind Zykkm-ahtro, as he kicks the nearest Mantis pursuing them in the head, setting off a chain of falling like a line of domino with too many limbs, “I hate to press you, but stop blocking the stairs and move it.”

They reach the top of the tower where they are greeted by Khunzar-ri and Razum-dar. Behind them are Zur and Gadris, who for a reason unknown looks like a Chimer embraced by Therisse and Zykkm-ahtro is not sure what those are called, and Lyris. They seem alive if a bit breathless, which is something both groups have in common.

“Thorn,” the woman turns to him sharply without a greeting that he didn't expect anyway, “you're the expert here. What by Kyne's feathery ass is going on?”

Zykkm-ahtro forces himself to smile, because if he didn't, he would start screaming and that would not help anything. “Therisse, the Devourer of the Sun, the Mother of Monsters, the End Promised

is entering this world. He is raising to power and his creations have been sent to destroy what could stop him – that is us.”

The Soul-melded Mages, Zykkm-ahtro settles on the plural, nod towards the south-southeast: “It is almost here now.” They are holding their own hands, probably seeking comfort in one another. If the time would permit it, the Iddaroth would be sickened by the display of affection. Alas, there more pressing concerns to tend to.

“What is?” Sai asks curiously.

“We have noticed an unidentified golden flying object headed our way. The flying Mantis in pursue seem to hinder its progress, but so far they weren't able to strike it down completely,” they point into the valley. “But since it is definitely going this way, we hope we find out before it tries to kill us.”

Zykkm-ahtro makes out what it is the first; his daedric eyes are far superior to mortal ones, and in the weak red sunlight does not blind him – so at least there is some use for Therisse in the end – and besides it he is the only member of the assorted company to have seen this sight before, or so he assumes. For a start, it is no gold, it is brass. This is the Tinkerer, the Brass Star of the Tempest, the Answer-and-Question.

He should get himself packed and scamper off, because they did not part on good terms. Molag Bal and Therisse gave him clear instructions: To ensure the Tinkerer will not speak of what lies beyond the Oblivion. The Tinkerer was reasonably furious with Zykkm-ahtro stealing his voice, but such an intelligent man could easily figure out what the other possibilities were, right?

The Iddaroth is too struck with pondering and reminiscing of his home world and the people he has met and hurt there to actually leave. When he hears the Sword Saint crying out that it has wings, he knows it is too late to depart now.

The question is, what is the Tinkerer doing here? Possible answers, far-fetched and most likely incorrect, swirl through Zykkm-ahtro's mind as the mer in his brass armour which makes him look more like a Dwemer construct rather than a mortal being lands in front of them on the top of the belfry, his mechanical wings folding upon itself and seemingly disappearing behind his back. His face is completely hidden behind his helmet.

Except for Razum-dar, who is still defending the door with all his might, everyone takes a step back. Zykkm-ahtro even takes two to get out of the Tinkerer's range of grasp. He cannot help the feeling that if looks could kill, he would be dead as he stands.

“I seek one of the following people: Cadwell, Khamira the Queen, Lyris the Titanborn, and-or Varen Aquilarios,” the Tinkerer says. Zykkm-ahtro is shocked, as words were the last thing he was expecting from him. Everyone else stares agape, because the gentle feminine voice like dew on grass does not fit the tall armed figure they see.

“Good,” the Chainbreaker nods, since he is not a man who is shocked easily. “You've found two of us. What brings you to this beautiful gore-ridden battlefield my good fellow?”

The Tinkerer produces what seems to be a pocket shaving mirror, but it is blind and it glimmers. “I have been sent to deliver to you the reflection of the lunar lattice. Whatever is your plan with it, you better do it quickly. I doubt that Tharn will be able to hold Hakoshae against the necromancer for much longer, and when Hakoshae falls, this world will follow.”

Cadwell takes the mirror. “How excellent, not a moment too soon dear chap. Jolly good. Zar, I

know you hate me, but right now I need you to do me the Aspect of... well, any moon you please, really, but it is not a solo act. And I am going to need a sorcerer, because I can't shape magicka to save my life, which is frankly exactly what it is to be for."

"I am-" Zykkm-ahtro starts, but is not allowed to finish.

It is because the Tinkerer, as if he hasn't heard him, steps forward: "Of course. I came here to help."

"We can help! Better another two pairs of hands," the Soul-melded Mages chime in.

"Awesome. Lyris? You have your whatsit bracelet?"

"I do."

"Good, because we need something to power it with, and I hate killing people I like," Cadwell pulls Lyris so the group form a pentagram.

Zykkm-ahtro, upon seeing that he is not needed, takes stand by the side: The tide of Mantis is exponentially growing, they are flying in through the open walls and climbing up the belfry. It seems that there is more than one way to the top of the tower after all... It is nothing a magical shield could not help with, they throws themselves at it like moths on lamp-glass with the same burning effect. That is until some weavers take notice and begin on taking his spell down. He is content he can hold it up for long enough, but if the ritual of banishment could be performed a little faster, he wouldn't be complaining.

Sai Sahan and Razum-dar continue to hold the door.

The Chainbreaker for all his surface foolishness is a man who knows what he is doing. The moonlight in the mirror is woven into intricate patterns, a net, a seal, a spear, a veil between the worlds.

Zykkm-ahtro blinks as a drop of sweat makes its way into his eye. Keeping the shield up against the increasing amount of Mantis weavers is draining. Why haven't they finished yet? What is taking them so long?

Because, as he realizes with sudden clarity, if they seal it right now, Therisse and his army along with that three-times traitorous bastard Mannimarco will remain here. They have no focus which would target Therisse's power.

The Tinkerer realizes as much in the same moment and announces it out loud. Even with the voice of a woman, which Zykkm-ahtro has no idea where he obtained, it is obvious how much the ritual strains him.

Zur and Gadriss smile at Lyris and take a step forward.

Zykkm-ahtro doesn't need an explanation: One of them has literally been brought back in Therisse's embrace. If they throw themselves in as a ritual focus, the returned one will be destroyed. A short life of destruction, and then a half-life of abandonment for the other, granted that he survives it.

And then there is the Tinkerer, his face obstructed but judging nevertheless.

With the ritual complete, what exactly would Zykkm-ahtro return to?

Before he knows how it happened, he is standing in the moonlight and Lyris's alarmed voice comes to him from a great distance, the words illegible. He feels the magic around him to press on, taking Therisse's spark out of his very core and pulling it out. The power is drained from him in waves. The process is painful and quick, and he cannot move. With each surge he feels himself fading, his field of vision shrinking.

There is a flash of blinding light and deafening sound as above them the bell moves on its own. And then-

Then blackness covers everything.

Everything is black, stiff and slightly warm. He cannot move. Or make a sound. He feels terribly weak. He has the vague feeling that he is standing and wonders what power is keeping him up on his feet. The passage of time is irrelevant, because there is no way to measure it.

It does not matter anyway.

Everything is still. Dark. Quiet. Peaceful. And just out of reach.

He is brought out of the apathetic stillness when something painfully punches him in the left side of his ribs and sends him gliding over the hard tiled floor with an ugly sound of stone grinding against stone.

He still doesn't see anything, but he can finally move, and so he reaches out to his head to see what is blocking his vision. A cold stone, a mask perhaps? With a great amount of struggle and hair pulling he manages to get it off.

He squints in the weak light of the setting sun. Above him is towering the Tinkerer, Lyris and... a very vaguely familiar man.

Everything hurts. Like a bitch. By the blood of the stars, he can't recall the last time he's felt this terribly. The weakness overcoming him is... human.

*That would make sense*, he thinks as he slowly stands up. By the gods, his *ribs*.

For a long while nobody says anything. He looks at the mask he is still holding in his hands; his assumption is proven correct because it is the face of the daedra he has been wearing. It shatters to pieces when he drops it to the ground, leaving behind ugly grey shards.

The top of the belfry is filled with these shards. He can even make out the place where he's had stood until now, because there are still two hollow stone feet.

"You have no idea how stiff it was in there," he finally says out, voice hoarse. As his vision returns, he can make out the details: The Tinkerer's frown, the man's receded hairline and many wrinkles, Lyris's white tunic and a flower in her hair.

The man speaks: "I take it that you are Zykkm-ahtro?"

"I was," he corrects. Zykkm-ahtro was a daedra. All of that was pulled out of him, all that is left is a human, and not even a full one at that. He feels like a shell with no snail to fill it.

"And what you are now?" the man presses on. Finally it clicks what is so familiar about him – it's the eyes, so many times seen in the mirror. Even with the face of an Iddaroth, eyes were the part

which refused to change.

For that reason he refuses to speak his name, a name he hasn't used in over a century, and answers: "Not winning any popularity vote, I'm afraid."

The Tinkerer growls.

"Oh, and apparently stuck here with you, am I not?" With the passage between the worlds closed he couldn't imagine a way to return back. There are worse fates to endure, especially considered that due to Tinkerer's resentment towards him his fate doesn't seem to be long-lived anyway. Twice so now that the mer grasps him by the neck.

The grip is tight enough to make breathing hard, but not enough to make it impossible. He forces himself to remain calm and ignores his racing heart. (He has a heartbeat again. That certainly is something he hasn't been missing.) "Now, now," he smiles, even though his voice is strained, "you certainly don't want to do anything reckless, do you?"

(Somewhere in the background Abnur Tharn stands on the tip of his toes and leaning to Lyris he asks in a whisper: "Do I really come off like this?"

Lyris, who isn't much for the subtleties, whispers in a voice of thunderstorm: "Yeah, pretty much all the time."

"In that case I bow to your self-restraint, because I recall you breaking my nose only three times."

"Shut up, Tharn. Don't push it.")

The grip tightens. The tip of his sabatons brush against the floor and then he loses solid ground under his feet completely.

"Kill me," he whispers to the Tinkerer. He would like his voice to be stronger, but he lacks the sufficient supply of air. "Kill me, go on." He knows the mer hasn't got the balls to do it in front of witnesses, not when he is defending himself. Unless he underestimated his hatred, of course...

The hand lets go. Oh, sweet, sweet air. His lungs ache as he breathes it in. "Now that you have decided for a civilised approach-" he breaks into a cough. He needs a moment to collect himself. Still bent over he pulls out a pendant on a chain from the hidden compartment of his right glove, careful enough that nobody sees what he has done.

"Here," he hands the little silver thing to the Tinkerer. There is hesitation. "You can have it back. I no longer have any use of it."

The Tinkerer takes his voice back and leaves the belfry without a word. Or any other reaction. His heavy steps echo on the stairs.

Lyris gives him a long look. He returns with a weary smile: "Is there any of that plum wine left? I feel a terrible urge to get absolutely hideously drunk."

He considers the pair at the altar with a shadow of doubt from the back rows. Granted, Lyris and the Sword Saint are obviously fond of each other and have known each other a long time now. But the wedding seems a bit of a hurried decision. The city of Rimmen is still in repairs after the near end of the world a week ago.



Gods be praised that literally everyone present at the ceremony hates pompous ceremonies, so at least they are here for twenty minutes for the most necessary of oaths and rites instead of twenty hours.

"I have been once told," the Tinkerer standing next to him speaks quietly, his voice blood and honey, "that every good story of romance should end with a gruesome death, a wedding, or preferably both." Giving him his voice back was a mistake.

He doesn't dignify that with a reply.

"What's the matter, Thorn?"

Thorn. Ever since he came down from the top of that tower, everyone's been calling him that with a knowing smile. In the words of the bride: "It is not that untranslatable pun. But I loathe to have two Tharn's around, that bastards a handful even when he is not here twice." Probably better to be called Thorn than the Grand Traitor.

The Tinkerer is not a person with whom he wants to share his bleary thoughts on his uncertain future and loss of purpose, years of grieves, pains, terrors and regrets. It is not something he wants to share with anyone. Instead he says: "you are mistaken. This is not a romance, it is a tragedy."

"Only you are so self-centred to think so."

Thorn looks around. The Chainbreaker and the Khunzar-ri are both in the front line of the crowd, but as far away from each other as possible, stealing pained glances at one another when they think the other is not looking. The Queen officiating the wedding amidst her ravaged kingdom. The blind Prophet passed by everyone in the corner. General Varitalas with mostly shaved head. The Sould-melded Mages whose appearances waver.

"I cannot think of anyone from whose point of view it is not a tragedy," he sighs finally.

"Your attitude is not helping to repress my desire to kill you."

"Well a good story ends with a wedding and a gruesome death, doesn't it?" It rewards him a painful jab in the ribs.

As the moons rise above the horizon, their light floods the night-filled cathedral otherwise illuminated only by candles. Both Masser and Secunda appear in the circular main window in their fullness. The sight renders Thorn speechless, and that says something.

He feels a tug at the back of his mind, a breach amidst the fine web of space. His prime suspect is the Chainbreaker, but the soul shriven's eyes are fixed on Khunzar-ri. And for a good reason, he seems to be dissolving in the light without anyone else taking notice.

"He was called on Nirn from the Plane of Jone only for a limited time," the Tinkerer whispers. "Do not be startled, the moons simply call him back home."

"I am not startled," Thorn hisses at him. "It's causing an opening within the spacial continuum. Don't stand here like a god's likeness, lend me a helping hand to get us home, we aren't going to get a second chance at this."

Travelling on the moonlight causes exceptional headaches. But it is worth it, Thorn thinks when he gets up and untangles his hair from the Tinkerer's armour.

His lungs fill with coarse ashes, and the sky of boiling blood and stars digs its claws painfully into his mind.

“You!” An authoritative voice above them demands even before they manage to get up: “Identify yourself and stand your reason for breaking into the Fortress of Sands!”

“Oh come on, Captain,” he smiles, “aren't you happy to see me and your beloved advisor?”

A sword pokes him in the chest. There indeed is no other place like home. The prominence to the battlefield fills him with an unquiet peace.

## Chapter End Notes

Last notes from me as the author here:

First and foremost, thank you for your nice comments and support and that you made it to the end with me.

Secondly, I know I promised the fic of Tharn and Augur chasing for the lunar lattice, don't worry, I haven't forgotten. This thing will be written, albeit slowly and sporadically, and I would like to focus on other fics during it (namely The Many Deaths Of Me, and one of the Discworld fics I have on hiatus right now. In case you've read them and have a favourite which you'd like me to continue, let me know, ok?)

Thirdly, and this part is so important that I give it a separate paragraph: I would like it if you viewed this fic as the first draft. This entire fic will be written and published again, probably under a different name, hopefully done better than this. I will start doing so once Greymoor is out and I get to play it. In case you don't remember, this work predates the announcement of Greymoor (or at least predates me hearing about it for the first time), and I would like to keep the final version of this story canon compliant.

As such, I would really appreciate your feedbacks. The parts you liked, didn't like, what felt unnecessary, what I might have added in, etc. Should I keep the concept of "guest chapters"? Should I include different people in them? Please, help me to pitch the version two to be better than this. (I am not saying this fic is bad. I am actually quite proud of it. I simply want the next version to be *better*)

Fourthly, the Tinkerer is very obviously Sotha Sil from the Other Nirn, Zykkm-ahtro is even more obviously the Other Nirn Abnur Tharn. The Captain who appears in the very last part and gets literally one line is Other!Nerevar. Has anyone's identity been forgotten? Atheleim/Varitalas could have been any Altmer background NPC you've met, really.

Fifthly and last of all, take care of yourself. Don't panic. Call someone you like. Don't join a cult.

## End Notes

How To Leave a Feedback: A guide.

- 1) Did you like this work? Smash the kudos button! The author is deeply insecure and reads "kudos" as "everyone hated this except the following people:"
- 2) Do you want to boost the author? Leave a comment!
2. a) Don't know what to write? What about "[X] part, OMG, I can't." or "I really liked [Y]." or "I think that [Z] is going to happen next." or even "It's fucking three AM, what has my life gone to? AAAAAAAA!" All those are good and valid comments.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!